

# Es'kia Mphahlele's *In Corner B*: Humanising Africans in a Dehumanising Epoch

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## Abstract

This article examines the multifaceted ways in which Es'kia Mphahlele interprets the lived experiences of Africans during the apartheid South Africa through his trope of African Humanism. The article demonstrates how Mphahlele foregrounds his philosophised African Humanism to project both a nuanced and blatant continuum of the dehumanisation of Africans in a polarised apartheid system. Mphahlele's *In Corner B* illustrates a thematic inflection of his idea of African Humanism and thus highlights the need to ventilate on the raw verities of Africans living under a repressive and racialised system - a system fixated on obliterating the identity and dignity of Africans, and also Mphahlele's intent to humanise and somewhat valourise Africans in a dehumanising milieu. Purely qualitative in approach and undergirded by a dual theoretical framework, this article develops a nexus between African Humanism and Afrocentricity in order to demonstrate how the two theoretical approaches assume their distinctive texture in Mphahlele's commentary on and consequent protest against the dehumanisation and juniorisation of Africans, a tact which ultimately draws Africans from the periphery to the centre of the discourse on identity and being, decoloniality and agency.

**Keywords:** Afrocentricity, African Humanism, African identity, African agency, dehumanisation, decoloniality.

## Introduction

Viewed as one of the twentieth century's foremost intellectuals, writers, humanists and teachers, Es'kia Mphahlele's volumes of eclectic scholarly and creative work form a basis upon which one might comprehend his literary efforts to foreground African personhood, identity and culture, among other thematic preoccupations (Ndlela, 2017). Hence, this article analyses Mphahlele's *In Corner B* (2006) considering how he, often in a subtle manner, uses African communities as a keystone upon which he anchors the construction and articulation of his philosophised Afrikan or African Humanism (Ndlela, 2017; Maake, 2011; Rafapa, 2005). Mphahlele's construction and articulation of African Humanism is launched against the backdrop of colonialism and apartheid, with the latter being a racialised and discriminatory system which found its expression in dehumanising other races whilst deifying another race on the basis of complexion. Furthermore, Mphahlele's writings may also be viewed as representative of "subaltern articulacy" in that, most of his writings, including *In Corner B*, were produced in South Africa and in exile, at the time when various legislations were passed to ensure that the subaltern could not speak (Mokgoatšana, 1999:28). *In Corner B* is a depiction of Mphahlele's balanced definition of Africanness free from an unrealistic and or exaggerated sense of aesthetic glorification (Masemola, 2004). In tandem with the latter assertion, this article sets out to demonstrate how Mphahlele affords most of his characters the latitude to prove the legitimacy and essence of African Humanism as a premise upon which Africans generally display their completeness as humans (Rafapa, 2005). This article further contends that in the display of their completeness as humans, Mphahlele's characters assume an oppositional stance, either subtly or openly to challenge apartheid's authorial power. Of importance in this article is how Mphahlele recurrently privileges African identity and experience in lieu of African Humanism. Through its pervasive tenets such as *Ubuntu/Hunhu* and communal interdependence, which fundamentally form the foundation of the African conception (Sibanda, 2015), African Humanism is cherished in Mphahlele's selected text as contrary to the belief systems and practices that negate the existence and dignity of other human

beings, for example, Africans (Edeh, 2015). *In Corner B* is analysed with the burden to prove that African Humanism “naturally enables the coexistence of all humans, irrespective of their creed, culture, tribe, nation or race” (Edeh, 2015:205), and is thus antagonistic to dehumanising ideologies and practices such as racism, xenophobia, tribalism. Congruent with the confrontation of this negation and the concurrent prescription of Mphahlele’s philosophised trope of African Humanism, *In Corner B* is also appreciated as a remedial intervention against the maladies of dehumanisation suffered by Africans during the apartheid regime in South Africa. Furthermore, Mphahlele’s foregrounding of the “African sense of respect for the human person” accompanied by an appreciation of “the traditional values of hospitality, primacy of the person, respect for life, sense of the sacred, familihood, brotherhood, solidarity and other characteristic features of the communalistic life of an African person” (Elejo, 2014:297), is considered as a significant tool in the (re)humanisation and ideological (re)significations of Africans in the face of dehumanising discourses and practices. Thus, this article aims to capture the multifaceted ways in which Mphahlele uses the barrel of the pen to expose and confront hegemonic discourses and practices which propounded the dehumanisation of Africans whilst at the same time, he (Mphahlele) humanises and valourises Africans. The article reveals that this tact is important to Mphahlele for two reasons, namely: (a) the need to bring into critical focus the suffrage of Africans who were physically and otherwise trapped in the dehumanising system of apartheid bedevilling Blacks (henceforth referred to as Africans) both in South Africa and exile; and (b) the need to galvanise Africans into assuming an antagonistic stance against dehumanisation and juniorisation by asserting their agency in the articulation of their identity and cultural distinctiveness. In this way, Mphahlele’s *In Corner B* becomes one of the critical propellants of the restoration and recognition of African identity and dignity, both at local and global levels, and consequently draws Africans from the margins to the centre of agential African narratives.

### Methodology

This article adopted the qualitative approach to examine Es’kia Mphahlele’s *In Corner B* in order to highlight how he inflects his African Humanism as a curative intervention in the deconstruction of dehumanising discourses and tendencies propounded by the apartheid system in South Africa. Although Mphahlele’s anthology contains sixteen short stories, a synthesis of quotations from only five short stories in *In Corner B*, namely; “Man Must Live”, “A Point of Identity”, “In Corner B”, “The Suitcase” and “The Master of Doornvlei” were purposively sampled and therefore, provided the primary data for this article. Secondary sources in the form of journal articles, theses, dissertations, book reviews and other forms of commentary on Mphahlele’s writings also fortified the thesis of this article. Thematic textual analysis was preferred in this article for its convenience in the systematic interpretation and description of content encapsulated in the texts (Milubi, 1997). Although the thematic patterns of *In Corner B* are numerous and thus arguably reflective of varied ideological outlooks from an analyst’s perspective, this article was nevertheless restricted to Mphahlele’s articulation of (1) African identity and being; (2) the primacy of personhood and human life in African culture and philosophy; (3) African communalist ethos and *ubuntu* as protractions of an African humanist outlook, and (4) Africans’ sense of agency and protest against dehumanisation. Prior to a discussion on these aspects, however, is the need to harmonise Mphahlele’s African Humanism, Africanity and Afrocentricity as the theoretical lynchpins of this article.

### The Nexus Between African Humanism, Africanity and Afrocentricity in Mphahlele’s *In Corner B*

In his effort to trace “the trajectory of relations of power that corrodes” South Africa where the African’ sense of belonging is unmade by racial oppression (Masemola, 2012), Mphahlele’s philosophised African Humanism finds pronounced expression in most of his writings such as *In Corner B*. Writing from the margins, Mphahlele attempts to reconfigure the subject of identity and cultural discourse through an articulation of African selfhood. In Southern Africa, the notion of humanism is identified variously as *ubuntu*, where *ubuntu* “is seen as an ethical philosophy which is centred on the people’s allegiances and relation with one another” (Edeh, 2015:206). Appended to the *ubuntu* philosophy or African Humanism, is the belief that a human being must be viewed and treated as primary in many respects (Edeh, 2015). Edeh (2015) asserts that this on its own highlights humanity as the central point of African Humanism. Put succinctly, African Humanism condenses both an ethical stance

and understanding which emphasises human dignity, concerns and capabilities. Apart from being connected to the idea of African identity and African renaissance (Edeh, 2015; Mogoboya, 2011), African Humanism inflects African culture, customs and traditions as deeply rooted in an ethical understanding of human value and the essence of human coexistence (Edeh, 2015). Nwoye (2017:42) endeavours to offer an African psychological rendering of “African personhood” or “human personhood”, and ultimately views African Humanism as that indigenous African assumption, made popular by the Nguni proverb, “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, which translates into ‘a person is a person through other persons’. Mphahlele’s *In Corner B* interpretes African Humanism or *ubuntu* as an essential tenet of African life and worldview, which if embraced, obliterates any sense and practice of belittlement and dehumanisation of Africans in particular and people in general.

Apart from reading Mphahlele’s *In Corner B* through an African humanist lens, Afrocentricity was also adopted to undergird the analysis of the text because of the theory’s emphasis on the agency of Africans across varied societal spheres, among other aspects (Asante, 1998). Part of the central argument of this article is that an African humanist approach is unthinkable without what Asante calls “African agency” in his, *The Afrocentric Idea* (1998). It is imperative to also resolve the confusion that surrounds the concepts Afrocentricity and Africanity, since the two concepts tend to be used synonymously by some scholars (Asante, 1998). Tembo (2016) notes that the concepts Pan-Africanism, Africanity, African identity and Afrocentricity are sometimes used synonymously. In such instances, the aforementioned concepts may, at times, be used to refer to the cultural unity of native African cultures, while at other times, they are used to denote the racial unity of African peoples (Tembo, 2016). The distinction between the two concepts, Africanity and Afrocentricity, is significant here because, how these concepts are approached determines, in a large measure, the efficacy of a challenge to hierarchy and hegemony. Hence, in *The Afrocentric Idea*, Asante (1998) asserts that Afrocentricity seeks agency and action while Africanity broadcasts identity and being. This article argues that Mphahlele’s *In Corner B* gravitates more towards Africanity than Afrocentricity, although the agency and action of Africans is quite notable in the text under scrutiny. It is also for this reason that this article develops a nexus between Africanity, Afrocentricity and African Humanism in order to generate a more productive architectonic balance in the analysis of Mphahlele’s text. This article further argues that in his gravitation towards Africanity, Mphahlele also sets out to revive the core African experience and to appreciate the efforts geared towards preserving and promoting things African (Mogoboya, 2011). This gravitation towards Africanity is essentially propounded by the fact that most of Mphahlele’s writings were produced whilst his native land was under the apartheid system, a system which sought to relegate African people and African experience to the background (Mogoboya, 2011). In the analysis, it is demonstrated that “by writing Self [e.g. in *Down Second Avenue*]” (Starfield, 2009), for example, Mphahlele employs his “trope” of African Humanism to humanise, and even valorise Africans in the face of a racialised system that seeks to efface the identities of African people. Thus, this article considers Mphahlele’s *In Corner B* as both a critical engagement with and blatant confrontation with oppression and discrimination, aided by the need to assert the agency and action, identity and being of Africans in the racial, colonial and apartheid period in South Africa. Mphahlele’s selected text is analysed bearing in mind that his thematic interests are often geared towards the mobilisation “to hold in counterpoise the harsh reality of hostile home and exile” (Masemola, 2004). However, due to spatial limitations, this article is restricted to Mphahlele’s humanisation of Africans only in South Africa.

### **Intersections of African Humanism, African Identity and Being in Mphahlele’s *In Corner B***

According to Rafapa (2005), Mphahlele operates at two levels in his writings. The first level depicts social experience whereas the second level entails articulating a sensible theory about the common experience of exile. In the first level, Mphahlele appears to testify to a continued concern with the distinctiveness of African identity and being, firstly at a local dimension. This, for example, is notable in the short story “A Point of Identity” (Mphahlele, 2006:88) where he comments on the absurdity of racism, surmising that the classification of people based on skin colour is not only preposterous but also harmful to human relations. “Left to ourselves”, the nameless narrator further avers, “we should speak of Africans, whether ‘Coloured’, ‘White’, ‘Indian’ or ‘Negro’” (Mphahlele:2006:88). In “A Point of Identity”, complexion and ethnicity become the basis upon which

Karel Almeida's identity and identification are premised. In the efforts to determine his ethnicity, for instance, it is concluded that Almeida is not African simply because he "was light in complexion" (Mphahlele, 2006:88). Although Mphahlele clearly assumes an antagonistic stance against discriminatory 'points of identity' in a racialised South Africa, he is equally quick to reveal how *ubuntu* transcends systematically racialised categories. In this short story, Africans are depicted as being hospitable to Almeida, irrespective of the distinction of his skin colour and foreign ethnicity. Through the short story, "A Point of Identity", Mphahlele demonstrates that people from different ethnicities can harmoniously coexist, if they taboo racial boundaries and categories as determinants of human worth. This ideal is appreciated by Almeida himself when he says: "I've always been [with] Africans [and] never felt [...] ashamed" (Mphahlele, 2006:90). Hence, Almeida has no problem living with an African woman as his wife. Whilst Mphahlele inflects this idealised harmony between a "Coloured" man and "very dark-skinned people" (Mphahlele, 2006:91), precisely at the matrimonial level, he is not, however, ignorant of the disharmony brought into human relations by the apartheid system. Almeida, for instance, has to live with his African wife whilst consistently reminded that "the white people who governed the country had long been worried about the large numbers of coloured Africans who were fair enough to want to play white, and of Negroes who were fair enough to want to try for Coloured" (Mphahlele, 2006: 91). Mixed parentage was illegalised in apartheid South Africa because the architects of the system were "worried about the prospect of one coffee-coloured race, which would shame what they called 'white civilisation' and the purity of their European blood" (Mphahlele, 2006: 91). This notion of 'purity of blood' is brought into critical focus in the short story "A Point of Identity" because it principally contributed to the fragmentation of families in the apartheid South Africa, because family members who failed to prove that they were either 'Coloured' or 'Black' were separated from their families, and were thus displaced from their familial and communal bonds. Exacerbating the matter was also that, upon confirmation that one was 'Black', such a (Black) person's wages would be lowered, which also implied that 'Blacks' [Africans] were of lower rank and value when compared to both 'Whites' and 'Coloureds' in South Africa. Thus, from the onset, Mphahlele ensures that he articulates African identity first in full view of the corrosive effects of colourism and second, against the backdrop of the dehumanising system of apartheid - a system whose exponents also classified African men and women as 'boys' and 'girls', among other slurs of dehumanisation and belittlement.

At the second level of his writing, Mphahlele humanises Africans by positing the theory of African Humanism (Rafapa, 2005). This is why at a close examination, Mphahlele's *In Corner B* portrays an interlocking allegiance between African identity and being, and his philosophised African Humanism. In the selected text, the notion of African identity and being and the attendant tropes of humanisation are inextricably intertwined with the conception of home, *ubuntu* or lack thereof, communal interdependence (solidarity), culture, acculturation, belonging, becoming, and alienation. Attached to the notion of African identity and being is the idea of human dignity and value, which Mphahlele agentively foregrounds in relation to African Humanism in his numerous writings through his characters' lamentations over the loss of life. Such a stance by Mphahlele is viewed by Ndlela (2017) as testament to the fact that Mphahlele knows that he has a responsibility to the broader society and entire human race. Also noteworthy in Mphahlele's *In Corner B* is the realisation that the concept 'African identity' is not looked at from a reductionist/essentialist vista where attributes can be listed and pinned down to a single subject for description (Mokgoatšana, 1999; Tembo, 2016). In Mphahlele's *In Corner B*, identity seems to be a complex entity which is fluid and ubiquitous (cf. Mogoboya, 2011), defying the colonial notion of 'fixity' in the definition of the 'African identity'. For Mphahlele, to define the concept 'African identity' in particular, becomes somewhat a treacherous act because the idea itself is so ambiguous that it rejects the unity of descriptions across disciplines (Mokgoatšana, 1999). Notwithstanding this, one may, in consensus with Mokgoatšana (1999), posit that an ontological definition of African identity, would as far as possible attempt to trace the ancestry of the subject, its attributes and history. On this ontological premise, the notion of 'sameness' emanates, particularly in the application of the concept 'African identity'. In the ontological sense then, 'African identity' may arguably be considered to be responsible for bringing together those attributes which are essential to describe what *is* (Mokgoatšana, 1999). Overall, and without sounding reductionist, 'African identity' may, at the basic level, also be defined as a mental construction of what one perceives of a subject (cf. Mokgoatšana, 1999). Of course, this perception will not necessarily be uniform among all people, but will depend on what

people construct as the most important kernel for the description of the *self*. Admittedly, also resultant from this notion may be the complication of the definition of 'African identity', because at its core, the construction and definition of 'African identity' thus simply becomes a matter of perspective. Nevertheless, in the analysis of *In Corner B*, Mphahlele's view of African identity is projected in relation to two frames of reference: a personal frame of self-definition and a social frame of self-definition (cf. Mokgoatšana, 1999). In elucidating the two frames, the concept 'African identity' is used to describe how Mphahlele's characters exude an understanding of who the self is and the purpose for which the self exists, which by implication, links the self with purpose, values; and the need for the self to assert itself ostensibly in an endeavour to attain a public acknowledgement of its uniqueness and value. Mphahlele's literary vision to articulate his own self-definition and that of his fellow Africans is aptly captured in his "My Experience as a Writer" which prefaces the short stories of *In Corner B*:

In all the nine years I was in America, I could not feel the country, grab it, couldn't pick up distinctive smells of places. So I gave up trying to spin something out of an American-inspired imagination; except, again, to express myself on African-American life, thought and literature [...] Africa would continue to be my literary beat [...] I try to capture some of the essence of Africa in general, of the African agony. It seemed to me that a 'decision' to forget the South African experience, or to allow it to recede into the background, would amount to a rejection of Africa as a whole, to lose faith in it (Mphahlele, 2006:9).

Such has been what Mphahlele goes on to term his Pan-African sensibility, an awareness of Africa's history, his exposure to its anger and frustrations, its joys, its wisdom and humanism in his writings (Mphahlele, 2006:8). Mphahlele's Pan-African sensibility is fundamentally lynched to the conviction that, "I am conscious of being an African writer speaking to Africans" (Mphahlele, 2006:9). Thus, for Mphahlele, any world of audience and intelligence other than Africa is too ephemeral for him to cherish, it seems. It is this need to write about and promote things African that anchors Mphahlele's centralisation of the life and humanity of Africans on both the personal and social frames of Africans' self-definition and- identification. Tied to this need is the realisation that, "so much has been written on the Bantu, but I have always felt something seriously wanting in such literature" (Mphahlele, 2006:11). Congruent with this, Mphahlele stresses: "I told myself there must surely be much more to be said than mere recounting of incident: about the loves and hates of my people; their desires; their poverty and affluence; their achievements and failures; their diligence and idleness; their cold indifference and enthusiasm; their sense of the comic; their full-throated laughter and their sense of the tragic with its attendant emotional sobs and ostentatious signs of pity" (Mphahlele, 2006:11). Here, Mphahlele also admits that there is a variety of themes to write about concerning Africans. Interestingly, in the abundance of thematic foci from which he could choose, Mphahlele prefers an incident that depicts both the humanity and humaneness of a sober man who loses his life whilst saving a drunk friend from an oncoming express train in "The Unfinished Story" (Mphahlele, 2006:12). Mphahlele prefers such a theme (of African people often dying mercilessly) because, encapsulated in the core of African Humanism, is the primacy of personhood, and consequently the sacredness of human life. Hence, this theme is further explored in the short story, "The Living and the Dead" (Mphahlele, 2006: 53) where Lebona's mind is ceaselessly occupied with a number of things, among which is the man who died the previous afternoon. The constant preoccupation with the man's death is not so much that he died but it is fundamentally about *how* he died that concerns Lebona: "Died, just like that. How could a man die like that –like a rat or a mere dog?" (Mphahlele, 2006:53). As if to emphasise the sacredness and value of human life, Talita, in the title story, "In Corner B" (Mphahlele, 2006: 72), echoes Lebona's question: "How can boys just stick a knife into someone's man like that?" (Mphahlele, 2006:72). Mphahlele's trope of African Humanism thus predominantly finds its clear expression in the valuation of human life and primacy of personhood. Human life is sacred and must, therefore, be ascribed the dignity and the value it so deserves.

### ***Ubuntu* and Communal Interdependence as Tenets of African Humanism**

From highlighting African Humanism through the African' lamentation over the desecration of human life, Mphahlele proceeds to an inflection of the African' communalistic ethos and *ubuntu* in cases where a human being dies in the African community. In the short story, "In Corner B" (Mphahlele, 2006:72), the sense of

communalism and *ubuntu* is demonstrated by both the bereaved family and members of the community. In many communities that still uphold the philosophy of African Humanism, it is customary to bury their deceased after seven days of their death. The burial, as Mphahlele narrates, “must be on the weekend to give as many people as possible an opportunity to attend it” (Mphahlele, 2006: 72). Implicit in the delaying of the burial by at least a week, is the consideration of other next of kin who come from the furthest parts of the country to have an opportunity to attend the burial. Furthermore, from an African humanist perspective, dignity is equally assigned to a living human being essentially the same way, if not more, as to a human being who died. In harmony with this view, Mphahlele reveals that, “The dead person cannot simply be packed off to the cemetery. You are a person because of other human beings, you are told” (Mphahlele, 2006: 72). Where there is a funeral in an African community, the sense of solidarity, communal interdependence and humanness is strongly exhibited in how members of the community, relatives and friends come and go, “saying words of consolation to the bereaved” (Mphahlele, 2006: 73). Here, a next of kin, acting “as spokesman” will “relate the circumstances of death to all who arrive for the first time” while “petty intrigues and dramatic scenes among the relatives as they prepare for the funeral are innumerable” (Mphahlele, 2006:73). This elucidation on the funeral scene in an African community is, on Mphahlele’s part, illustrative of the fact that in the African culture where African Humanism prevails, one is never alone in a time of grief. This notion is echoed by the narrator of the short story, “A Point of Identity”: “Isn’t one strengthened by the fact that one is not suffering alone?” (Mphahlele, 2006: 93). Talita, a widow, is constantly surrounded by compassionate friends, relatives and community members who are ever-ready to cater to her needs, whatever they may be, in her moment of grief. Hence, the recurrent, and yet appreciated questions permeating the scene are: “What will you eat now?” or “Has your headache stopped today?” or “Are your bowels moving properly?” or “The burial society wants your marriage certificate, where do you keep it?” (Mphahlele, 2006:73). The questions are never a nuisance to Talita because they emanate from an African humanist consciousness which is anchored on the need to demonstrate that one is a person because of other people. Furthermore, friends and relatives of the bereaved do not merely come with consoling words, they also donate money to help with funeral expenses such as groceries. This, by implication, purports to the notion that in the African culture, individualism or ‘living like an island’, is a foreign conception (Mogoboya, 2019).

### **The Inevitable Clash: African Communalism *Vis-à-vis* Western Individualism**

Whereas Lebona, an African humanist, in “The Living and the Dead”, pours out his heart over who died at a railway station whom he did not know, Stoffel (a European man), on the other hand, could not care less about that, because to Stoffel, “Black was black, white was white – that was all that mattered” (Mphahlele, 2006: 62). In fact, whereas Mphahlele implicitly hints at the dignity ascribed to both the living and dead human beings in the African culture, he does not, however, think this is the case with the White imperialists of the time, particularly where it concerns an African’s death. Hence, the rhetoric question is raised, “When has a black corpse been important?” (Mphahlele, 2006: 75). This is counterpoised with the awareness that, had it been a White person murdered like Talita’s (African) husband, “the newspapers would be screaming about a manhunt morning and evening since Thursday, the city would be upside down” (Mphahlele, 2006: 75). Through this communal voice, Mphahlele reveals that [Black] or African lives did not matter, at least in comparison to [White] lives during the apartheid regime in South Africa. Here, Mphahlele also indicates the contrastive dimensions between African Humanism and Europeanism. He subtly uses Jackson’s father as a case in point that although Africans may generally take pride in the ownership of cattle and land, their greatest delight, however, is rooted mainly in harmonious relationships with children, extended family members and other members of the community. This contrasts with the colonist’s outlook on life which equates Africans with animals, as evinced by how Jackson is brutalised by the White police officers who regard him as a “monkey” (Mphahlele, 2006: 64). In the short story, “The Living and the Dead”, Mphahlele further shows how the White people who employed Africans during the apartheid era valued Africans’ for their servitude more than their personhood. For instance, in Stoffel Visser’s conversation with Doppie Fourie, Visser is infuriated because Jackson (his African servant or ‘houseboy’) is not around to make him breakfast. Jackson’s absence compounds Visser’s fury because Visser’s chief concern is that: “I [Visser] can’t get my bloody breakfast in time because I’ve got to do it myself, and you know *I must* have a good breakfast every day” (Mphahlele, 2006:54 original italics). Visser further states that what is worse is that his clock is out of order, and “the bloody Jackson’s not

here to wake me up. So I oversleep” (Mphahlele, 2006:54). In this way, Mphahlele implicitly highlights how Africans were simply reduced to slaves, useful for nothing but for the appeasement of the colonisers’ unflagging appetites. Visser only likes Jackson, his cook, for one thing, and that is, Jackson “served him with the devotion of a trained animal and ministered to all his bachelor whims and eating habits for four years” (Mphahlele, 2006:57). Visser and Jackson are not equals; Jackson is the servant, Visser is the master, and Visser prefers it that way. Also remarkable in the short story is that Visser is not concerned about whether or not any harm could have befallen Jackson; his main concern is his breakfast and being woken up on time by Jackson. With this, Mphahlele sarcastically alludes to the indolence and even the inability of the coloniser to do things as basic as fixing his own meals without the help of the colonised. Even in his eventual self-induced compulsion to search for Jackson, Visser has to, “for the first time in his life [...] look for a black man because he meant much to him – at any rate as a servant” (Mphahlele, 2006: 62). Through Visser and Fourie’s conversation, Mphahlele further alludes to the juniorisation of Africans by projecting them as nothing but mere subjugated beings who cannot even throw a party without agitating the coloniser. Implicit in the colonisers’ somewhat inflated and yet fragile egos, and superiority complexes, however, is also the fear that when the colonised are not under their watchful gaze, the likelihood is that they (the colonized) are planning and possibly staging a protest against the system, and may, to the coloniser’s dread, ultimately take over power from them. Accessing the mind of the coloniser through Visser and Fourie is important to Mphahlele because this is one of the keystones upon which he seeks to demonstrate the agency and vivacity of Africans in an otherwise repressive system. Visser and Fourie typify the collective anxiety of the colonisers who realise that notwithstanding strategies and systems which were put in place to perpetuate the subjugation and dehumanisation of Africans, Africans still managed to survive. Hence, appended to the coloniser’s epiphanies is, “it doesn’t pay any more to pretend we’re being just and fair to the kaffir by controlling him. No use even trying to tell him he’s going to like living in enclosures” (Mphahlele, 2006:55). The coloniser realises that Africans can no longer be caged, and senses an imminent protest against his system. Apart from using “certain things to stop the birth of [African] human beings” (Mphahlele, 2006: 63), the coloniser’s combative move against this protest was predicated on the assumption, “is n’t it because we know what the kaffir wants that we must call a halt to his ambitious wants?” (Mphahlele, 2006:55). The coloniser realises that the danger is not merely an African’s increasing anger against dehumanisation and juniorisation, but also the tendency of the coloniser to assume that the colonised African will believe whatever the coloniser says with unquestioning acceptance. This assumption, the coloniser fears, might drive him (the coloniser) to a sense of lethargy which would be fatal to him (the coloniser) because, whilst the coloniser ‘sleeps’, the ‘kaffirs’ might take over. It is for this reason that Visser is concerned about the “kaffirs swarming over our suburbs, living there, gambling there, breeding there, drinking there and sleeping there with girls” (Mphahlele, 2006:54). For Visser, Africans may try to do what White people do, but even worse, in the area designated only for Whites. The presence of Africans in a ‘White’ designated area is, by implication, an indication of the area’s loss of value because ‘valueless’ human beings are there. This is why the collective voice of the colonisers demands that “the number of servants in each household be brought down because it wouldn’t do for blacks to run the suburbs from their quarters in European backyards” (Mphahlele, 2006:57). The divergent voices in the colonisers’ meetings where African servants formed the crux of the agenda could not agree on what was to be done to prevent the imminent rise of Africans against segregation and repression. Put bluntly, the further away Africans are from White areas, the more valuable the area remains. According to Visser, his fellow colonisers will not realise how problematic it is to have “the kaffirs” as equals in the land until “the kaffirs” enter their houses and boss them about and sleep with white girls”, thus necessitating the question, “What’s to happen to white civilisation?” (Mphahlele, 2006:54-55). In this short story, Mphahlele provides the reader with an index into the coloniser’s perception of and discourse on the colonised, which is, the coloniser can only establish his colonisation project by keeping the colonised silenced, dehumanised and marginalised.

Although the coloniser, in the person of Fourie, seems to exude power externally (over Africans), internally, however, he loathes himself for his overwhelming sense of inferiority and inadequacy, especially in the presence of other fellow colonisers (men) who are like “rugby-playing types with their bravado” (Mphahlele, 2006:55). To Mphahlele, the colonisers are not as strong and powerful as they would like the colonised to believe. It seems Jackson is aware of this frailty because for the first time, after being called “a monkey” and equated with a

baboon, he (Jackson) fights and speaks back to the coloniser. Jackson is also assaulted for simply reading a book, which is an offence to the coloniser, seemingly because the coloniser assumes that he has monopoly over the African's acquisition of knowledge. It is only when Jackson narrates his brutalisation by White police officers that Visser learns that he had not considered Jackson on equal terms as a human being. For four years, Jackson and his family were nothing but mere distant abstractions "- just names representing some persons, not human flesh and blood and heart and mind" (Mphahlele, 2006:65). One would expect that after hearing about Jackson's sordid ordeal at the hands of brutal colonial police officers, Visser would extend some measure of empathy, but as if true to form and ideological outlook, all Visser (the coloniser) was preoccupied with was which option was better: to sack Jackson or to "continue treating him as a name, not another human being" (Mphahlele, 2006:65). To his own benefit, Visser eventually decided that it was better to "let Jackson continue as a machine to work for him" (Mphahlele, 2006:65). This tact by Mphahlele is intended to illustrate that the colonisers did not care about the African and his/her humanist conceptions. In fact, the dehumanisation of Africans was the bedrock upon which their colonial and racialised system was built and thrived.

### **The Beauty of African Humanism Against Varied Vices in Mphahlele's *In Corner B***

According to Rafapa (2005), Mphahlele's short stories can fundamentally be categorised into: (a) his interest in exploiting everyday life mainly to demonstrate the virtues, follies and frailties of Africans, and an inclination to the protest mode of putting emphasis principally on apartheid to such an extent that apartheid almost becomes the overriding protagonist, and (b), his interest in people, their own ghetto life, their own little dramas and tragedies, which would not necessarily have to do with the racial issue. The first category has been alluded to in the previous section of this article while the latter category is discussed now. In the second category, Mphahlele, attributes secondary blame to apartheid as if to highlight that some African characters in his short stories had no choice but to side with the colonisers in order to supplement their meagre income. Although Mphahlele tries to 'understand' such Africans' predicament, he cannot, however, withhold his criticism of such characters' violation of the principles of African Humanism. To this effect, Mphahlele seems to side with Africans who maintain an African humanist ethos, irrespective of the repressive and racialised system of apartheid. In the short story, "Man Must Live" (Mphahlele, 2006:14), Mphahlele tries to show and simultaneously commend some Africans such as Khalima Zungu, as not only prideful in their work, but also as demonstrative of a 'strong' work ethic. This commendable trait, however, is quickly dissolved, if not overshadowed by the immediate revelation of Zungu's allegiance to the colonisers instead of solidarity with his fellow Africans who are ill-treated. Zungu, a railway policeman, who "was proud of himself and his work" (Mphahlele, 2006:14), antagonises his fellow Africans by siding with the colonisers in the dehumanisation of Africans. Zungu is assigned by White people to channel masses of Africans into trains like livestock into a kraal (Rafapa, 2005), and, in wielding his control over the masses of commuters in a manner that goes against the grain of African Humanism. For this he earns the wrath of his fellow Africans. This was compounded by his detached address and unilateral issuing of directives to commuters. This posture goes against the grain of African Humanism because one of the tenets of the philosophy is that it endorses dialogue as the preferred mode of interaction (Rafapa, 2005). Zungu further exacerbates the African commuters' antagonism towards him by appearing to enjoy the power he wields over them, an act that is congruent with the colonisers' treatment of Africans. Notwithstanding this character, Mphahlele turns his focus to the vivacity of the Africans who are ill-treated by Zungu and his 'masters'. In the short story, Mphahlele demonstrates that although Africans were living in appalling circumstances, they still exuded a sense of hopeful survival rather than a despondent and surrendering demeanour. Through the Africans who collectively criticise Zungu's 'disloyalty' to African Humanism, Mphahlele also portrays Africans as people who broach what Rafapa (2005:106) calls "a wholesome approach to living". Thus, for Mphahlele, humanising Africans entails appreciating their ability to live life to the full and somewhat thrive even under impossible conditions (Rafapa, 2005). Although in "Man Must Live" the collective voice of Africans recedes to the background, and only Zungu's voice rises to prominence (Rafapa, 2005), Mphahlele still succeeds in using Zungu as an epitome of the colonised Africans who straddle the two worlds by maintaining a cosmetic equilibrium between the African and European cultures. Hence, in his mimicry of European people's mannerisms, Zungu ultimately exhibits an improper, errant and hybrid consciousness resultant from his tutelage under European pedagogy and disregard for African Humanism. Through Zungu,



Mphahlele effectively depicts the effect of mental colonisation on Africans' cultural consciousness, how colonialism negatively impacted the African' relations with one another and the resultant cultural schizophrenia (Abodunrin, 2018) that pervaded the psyche of Africans in the apartheid era. The result was that Africans such as Zungu had no choice but to see through the colonisers eyes because of his proximity to them and his attendant idolisation of their mannerisms. This, for Mphahlele, exterminated Zungu's African conscience (cf. Rafapa, 2005). However, Mphahlele does not end on this note as he contrastively foregrounds the tenacity of Africanity and African Humanism when Zungu, who had been saved from a bonfire, shuns his Westernised behaviour and consciousness, and ends up surviving as a humble, communal member of Shantytown. Here, Mphahlele illustrates that Zungu's colonised condition not only affected his perception of fellow Africans, but also nearly annihilated his sense of identity and being, that is, his Africanness. In his effort to 'ape' Europeans, Zungu, hard as he tried, never became a European. Thus, through Zungu, Mphahlele demonstrates that Africans' disavowal of their African consciousness in preference of European consciousness yields nothing but cultural ambivalence and a vague sense of identity. For Mphahlele, Zungu is also used to advance the notion that however hard Africans may try to shun their African identity and being, their Africanity will always (re)surface against their admiration and idolisation of Europeanism. This is why Zungu is subtly projected as an African who vacillates between an uncritical acceptance of colonial values and the tenacity of the Africanist's conceptions of personhood (Rafapa, 2005). Zungu thus becomes somewhat a prototype of how colonisation in general and apartheid in particular, contributed to the creation of Africans who were and still are constantly and consistently torn between two ideological outlooks, a reality that ultimately resulted in some Africans becoming pawns in the apartheid chessboard, aiding the system in the dehumanisation of their fellow Africans. Such Africans, like Zungu, alienate their fellow Africans because of the reprehensible role they assume in the repressive and dehumanising system. At the end of the short story, Mphahlele not only offers a subtle appraisal of the tenacity of African Humanism and culture, even when it is juxtaposed with an imperial culture, but also appreciates the cultural cohesiveness and connectedness of Africans. This, for Mphahlele, indicates that although African Humanism and Africanity may, as a matter of necessity, be compelled to adapt to modernity, they still retain their dignified essence (Rafapa, 2005).

In the short story, "The Master of Doornvlei" (Mphahlele, 2006: 42), Mfukeri grovels before his employers the same way Zungu in "Man Must Live" does, and both directly and indirectly aid the Afrikaner farmer to make Africans comply with the dehumanising conditions of farm work (cf. Rafapa, 2005). Against this practice, Mphahlele uses Tau Radebe as an antithesis of the colonial aides, Zungu' and Mfukeri, respectively. Radebe, for instance, organises the labourers into a bargaining group, a tenet that is in harmony with African Humanism, and involves them in the decision-making process rather than working in individualist isolation (Rafapa, 2005). Hence, the Afrikaner farmer who views Africans as children, among other derogatory perceptions, eventually learns that Africans will neither concede to belittlement nor dehumanisation for long. Equally important is Mfukeri's realisation that he and his fellow Africans possess the power to dismantle the system of oppression and dehumanisation. Mfukeri's sense of power and attainment of 'sanity' is reflected when he walks away in protest after the Afrikaner farmer ordered him to kill his (Mfukeri's) black bull after it had defeated the farmer's stallion in a fight. Although in the short story, "The Master of Doornvlei", the apartheid context is not overemphasised, Mphahlele demonstrates that Africans "are equal to any race and should be recognised for being as fully human as anyone else" (Rafapa, 2005:115).

Apart from subtly assuming an antagonistic stance against Africans who side with the colonisers through his characters, Mphahlele also sheds light on the African's uphill struggles towards living comfortably in such a dehumanising epoch. In the short story, "The Suitcase" (Mphahlele, 2006:27), Timi is firstly portrayed as an embodiment of hope and resilience, and unflinching in his belief in African values. He searches for work in the context and time where a man is classified as "a boy" (Mphahlele, 2006: 27). Mphahlele uses the metaphor of a fight between a wasp and a worm, to draw Timi's voice into critical focus. After watching the fight, Timi questions the fairness of the fight and elevates the query to his immediate context: "Must it always be thus, he asked - the well-armed and agile creatures sting the defenceless to death?" (Mphahlele, 2006: 28). On the surface, Timi is merely fascinated by the fight between non-human creatures, but on a deeper level, the fight

between the wasp and the worm exemplifies the conditions in which Africans live, where they are treated as 'worms' in the system of 'wasps'. Against this backdrop, Mphahlele further illuminates the plight of African men in particular during the apartheid era in South Africa. Timi, as a representative of most African men at the time, moves from place to place in search of work, and many times, he is belittled and given ultimatums by prospective (White) employers to either concede to low wages, or not get a job at all. Although, unlike the wasp which has a worm to take home, Timi has nothing to take home. However, his wife fathoms the notion of *ubuntu* as linked to support and encouragement in marriage. Timi's frail and pregnant wife whose recurrent supportive mantras are, "Tomorrow's sun must rise, Timi. It rises for everyone. It may have its fortunes" and "I will make a little fire, Timi. Our sages say even where there is no pot to boil there should be a fire" (Mphahlele, 2006:28), consistently encourage him to hope for a better life and future even in the face of intermittent disappointments. This notion of solidarity and mutual support within the marital sphere in the African community is also bolstered in the short story "In Corner B" where Talita and her late husband have lived together for nineteen years through "countless bright and cloudy days [...] physical and mental violence around them; the privation; police raids; political strikes and attendant clashes between the police and boycotters..." (Mphahlele, 2006:74). Here, Mphahlele highlights the notion that Africans advocate preservation of marriage and stability in the home, irrespective of the inevitable challenges that may threaten the stability and security of the very home. In the short story, Mphahlele also hints at the eagerness of a White man to share alcohol with Timi and not money (what Timi desperately needed to feed his family). One can only wonder whether or not the White man's gesture was an act of hospitality or the only measure of generosity which Timi's oppressor could willingly extend to him without reservations. His offer of alcohol to an African could also be indexed into the coloniser's perception of the African's presumed affinity for drunkenness as evinced in the short story "The Living and the Dead" (Mphahlele, 2006:53) where Jackson, whose whereabouts could not be determined by his White Master, Visser, was assumed to be "under a hangover" because "you know what these kaffirs are" (Mphahlele, 2006:59). However credible some Africans may be under economic repression, some like Timi, who at first was depicted as a man of integrity and honesty only in the sense that he does not want to do anything that would get him into jail, eventually compromise their own ethics and steal a suitcase left by an unknown woman in the bus. Timi can only ease his own conscience by attributing his stealing of the suitcase to Providence's (God?) kindness and "surely the spirits of his ancestors" who had pity on him with a sick child and hungry children (Mphahlele, 2006:31). Evidently, Mphahlele highlights the desperate measures to which an African man resorted in order to sustain himself economically in a milieu characterised by economic repression. When confronted and implored to tell the truth about the suitcase, Timi insists that the suitcase was his. Through some collective voices that objected to Timi's theft of the stranger's suitcase, Mphahlele illustrates that in African humanist living, theft is prohibited. Timi is only saved by the intervention of a voice that asserts, "It's his lucky day...let him be!" (Mphahlele, 2006:29). Also through Timi's theft, Mphahlele implicitly ascribes secondary blame to apartheid, the system designed to deny the likes of Timi (Africans) equal opportunities to those accessed by White people in South Africa, where some, if not most Africans had no choice but to resort to illicit means to supplement their meagre family income. This is also captured in the short story, "In Corner B", where some African families sold illicit liquor as a reaction to economic repression. As already indicated, Mphahlele seems to pardon Africans for what may be termed 'illicit' behaviour by ascribing secondary blame to apartheid as the cause of the behaviour. For instance, in the short story "In Corner B", the young men who allegedly murdered Talita's husband only did so because they were economically repressed by the apartheid system. But, even in such attempts at self-sustenance, there are still fellow Africans serving as police officers and thus siding with the apartheid system to dash African's hopes of survival. This is why Timi did not make it home with the suitcase he had stolen because the nameless African man who interrogated him earlier about the suitcase in the bus seemingly reported Timi to the (White) police. Mphahlele leaves it to the reader to decide whether or not the African man who reported Timi did so because he has a strong sense of justice and honesty, which are essential tenets of African Humanism, or whether or not he sought to solicit favour with and approval from the White people like Zungu and Mfukeri. However, one realises that the man "hardly looked at Timi" but "just looked in front of him in a self-righteous posture" (Mphahlele, 2006:32), the plausible conclusion is that the man sought to curtail favour with the White constables. With this, Mphahlele illustrates the effect of colonisation on some Africans who, in the hope of attaining some measure of value in the eyes of the colonisers,

turned their backs against their own, and thus exacerbated the dehumanisation of Africans. On another dimension, however, it seems Mphahlele advances the notion that no matter how severe circumstances may be, African values should never be sacrificed or compromised for selfish gain. The story ends with Timi finally learning what the contents of the suitcase were - a ghastly sight of a dead baby, which, if he had known earlier, he would not have insisted that the suitcase was his.

### Conclusion

There are significant ways in which Es'kia Mphahlele humanises Africans in a system solely designed to belittle and dehumanise them. In his *In Corner B*, Mphahlele tenaciously fights and advocates for the centering of African experience and agency as he feels that Africans and their agency are not accorded due and dignified recognition in a racialised and repressive system of apartheid in South Africa. Mphahlele brings into relief the many instances in which Africans are ascribed unsavoury attributes, among other derogatory features, by their colonisers, and simultaneously confronts these portrayures by interlocking his philosophised trope of African Humanism with African identity and culture. Although Mphahlele largely humanises and valourises Africans, he does not, however, offer an unrealistic idealisation of Africans in his writings. At best, Mphahlele's *In Corner B* marshals the primacy and value of African selfhood and humanity, and further demonstrates that African lives, like all other human lives, matter.

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