

REPRESENTATIONS OF ETHNICISED VIOLENCE IN KENYA: THE CASE OF KINYANJUI KOMBANI'S *THE LAST VILLAINS OF MOLO*

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Abstract

This paper examines the twin notion of amnesia and complicity as evidenced in literary representations of ethnic violence in post colonial Africa. Starting from the premise that the relatively large body of writing based on the occurrence of this type of violence is by itself an affirmation of the way literature as a cultural product is tied to the social circumstance within which it is created, we look at how the literary works reconstruct narrative structures and characters to represent the traumatic experiences of the recent past. In dealing with the violent encounters the acts of perpetration and victimhood form an axis upon which the writing negotiates or mediates the post traumatic memory. The paper focuses primarily on Kinyanjui Kombani's "The Last Villains of Molo", a 2004 novel based on the 1991 ethnic violence in Kenya but which in a sense predicates the subsequent and even more violent encounters of 1997 and 2008 which took Kenya to the brink of a failed state. "The Last Villains of Molo" bears a similar burden as that of works such as Gatore's "The Past Ahead", Ndwanaye's "The Promise I made my Sister", Courtemanche's "A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali", Combres's "Broken Memory" and Kyomuhendo's "Secrets No More", among others. In all these works which deal with the violence and genocide that has been a resident evil in Eastern Africa for the last two decades, often the problem has been how to present or bear witness to the entrapment of the society in some terrible and haunting memory that results from a traumatic disorientation. We employ a range of ideas which have trauma and loss as their concern, such as Freudian psychoanalysis and trauma theory especially from Caruth (1996a), to analyze the complexity of narration of violence, genocide and dislocation.

Key Words: Ethnicity, Violence, Amnesty, complicity, Postcolonial, Amnesia, Trauma

Introduction

The prescence of a large body of writing on ethnic violence in post-colonial Africa is a reflection of the way literature, as a cultural product, is closely tied to the social circumstance within which it is created. This is not unique to a specific space, least of all Africa. As Palmer (2008) observes, "Most wars in history eventually give rise to a body of literature"(p.6). The proliferation of this type of writing can be attributed to multiple factors, including: the desire to present the events as they happened in the violent encounters; the mystery around them; the

causes and the impact on the society, and also as a record of the traumatic experiences of the victims and the perpetrators. Writing which deals with traumatic experiences on a large scale must thus find a way of creating, recreating or picturing characters, and constructing or reconstructing narrative structures equal to carry the weight of the human experiences therein. The repertoire of texts within the recent past from the 'lake region' include, for example from Rwanda and Uganda: Gatore's *The Past Ahead*; Ndwanaye's *The Promise I Made My Sister*; Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*; Combre's *Broken Memory*; Monembo's *The Oldest Orphan*; Tadjó's *The Shadow of Imana*, and Kyomuhendo's *Secrets No More*.

Writing about Ethnic Violence/ Factual Representations

A number of studies and reports recognise the existence of a pattern of ethnic violence in Kenya dating back to independence. Oyugi (2000) traces these occurrences, first in relation to the localities and then the factors that lead to them. Osamba (2001) examines the contribution of a skewed political and economic transition towards nationhood. Anyang-Nyongo (1993) recognises the significance of accumulation and legitimization in the pattern of violence.

A number of reports such as Human Rights Watch, Africa (1997); Kiliku Report (1992), ICJ (2002); Nemu, Waki and Kriegler Reports (2008) all coming at different periods of time and circumstance deal with the use of ethnicized violence as a political tool.

These reports and studies are in agreement about the ethnicised aspect of the violence. A number of constants are clearly discernible in the violence, namely: the calculated manner in which ethnic antagonism is fuelled; the involvement of external forces (both organisational and combatant); extreme acts of atrocity aimed at creating extreme fear meant to precipitate the exodus of groups from particular places, and the partisan position taken by the government during the violence.

Kinyanjui Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo* (2004) is the first Kenyan novel to deal exclusively with the ethnic violence that post-independent Kenya experienced. It focusses specifically on the upheavals of 1991 which had been experienced in earlier periods but were even more aggravated in 1997 and 2008. The fact that this novel emerged more than 10 years after the killings, coupled with the very muted reception it has received to date, suggests the existence of the twin notions of amnesia and complicity within the social fabric of Kenya as a nation.

Although *A Friend of the Court* (1994) comes close to doing the same, it does not approach the presentation through several perspectives like Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo* (2004). *A Friend of the Court* seems to primarily use the conflict as a background for the romantic relationship between the two key characters as well as the story of their law firm. The names of the characters who perpetrate the violence as well as the setting also move.

Friend of the Court closer to an imagined rather than real experience. However, both works capture the traumatic experiences of the larger society.

Amnesia and complicity, as Mark Sanders (2002) notes, attempt to push away and/or into a remote part of the mind such that retrieval is not possible, and coupled with this is the fact that failure to deal with the pain renders a society vulnerable to repetition. Literary texts are a space through which writers may facilitate a responsible engagement with the pain of their characters.

By confronting the violence the novel becomes a space through which at the superficial level we can piece together the specific narrative of the violence of 1992 in Kenya largely dismissed by the Kenyan authorities at the time as 'tribal clashes'. Molo, which is the novel's twin setting alongside Nairobi as the other, was the epicentre of the outbreak but the antagonism quickly flared up and spread to the rest of the country, threatening to tear it to pieces. This centre, an ethnically mixed area rich in agriculture and votes, was the battle zone between the Kalenjin tribe and other ethnicities. The novel deals with the reasons for the violence, the most crucial being that it was meant to vindicate the then President's assertion that multiparty politics was untenable in an ethnically diverse society such as Kenya. Kiliku (1992), and the U.S. State Department (1999), among others, report that by the end of the atrocities, between 700 and 1,000 people had been killed and 150,000 to 250,000 people had been rendered homeless. Houses were burnt, livestock killed, infrastructure destroyed, and lives disrupted and/or destroyed, leaving behind a terrified and deeply traumatised populace. The emphasis on the concept of complicity in the violence is evident in the fact that, rather than subside, the successive cycles of the violence seemed to have been even more intense. The 2008 post-election violence, built on the same pattern, was by far the most vicious and widespread, putting Kenya on the unenviable pedestal of failed states and needing the international community to intervene and restore sanity.

The Last Villain of Molo (Kombani, 2004) spans a period almost 10 years, starting in the prologue in 1992 then moving to the present-day of the novel in 2002. Throughout the novel, the action shifts between the various points of time central to the realisation of the representations. There is an ominous darkness at the beginning of the novel and, vaguely, we get the feeling the characters are in some form of entrapment, bound together by some terrible memory encapsulating the past.

Stylisation of Trauma

How does one give a sense of structure to an experience which has a haunting and haunted presence? The writer's choice of flashback in the novel gives it a stuttering element. The fluency in communicative ability is shattered by the traumatic events and this is reflected not only in the characters but also in the structure of the narrative. Walter Benjamin, in *The Storyteller* (1984), gives a description of soldiers returning from World War 1 noting:

“Was it not noticeable at the end of war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent - not richer but poorer in communicable experience” (p. 84)

War and its attendant violence might be full of experience way beyond that in peaceful time society but those who go through it seem to develop withdrawal symptoms such as in the acts of speech. The flashbacks seem to mirror the disorientation of the characters in the novel, and the jarring glances at the past and the sites of atrocities are unordered and difficult to sustain. The use of these flashbacks is an attempt to do justice to the representation of sets of events. The spatial nature of the event, therefore, retains its defining features. As is usual in a situation of genocidal violence, the victims are caught unawares and are thrown into a great disorder coupled with panic. No one escapes unscathed and hardly anyone can express themselves with regard to what befalls them. The challenge of the novel form, therefore, is how to put to order something that the actual actors cannot verbalize.

Scars of Violence

The key characters in *The Last Villains of Molo* (Kombani, 2004) are bound together by the violence - they are, - so to say, children of violence. Nancy, on one side, though seemingly living in splendour, is in reality masked by the facade and seething with revenge. Bone and his four companions (Bomb/Bomu, Rock, Ngetha/Mugger, and Bafu/Bathroom) on the other hand, are cut off from their past (p. 121) and live in a no-man's land, as is suggested by the name given to their actual living space (slaughter house), and survive on a hand-to-mouth basis. Feared and envied in equal measure by their neighbours, they lead a very fragmented and absurd life.

As one of the characters says, “I’m living today like there’s no tomorrow” (TLVM p. 26). The desire to live in a compartmentalised state which erases the past and has no future is one of the characteristics of these five companions.

The ‘wasteland space’ and the makeshift utilities are suggestive of an attempt to literally disappear or be anonymous.

Nancy, on the other hand, is from ‘the other side of town’, recently returned from America and lives an opulent lifestyle which the five and their neighbourhood can only feel envious of. She enters their lives through Bone and transforms them unknowingly, forcing them to confront their past and think about a possible future. The irony as the novel proceeds is that Nancy is simultaneously their victim, antagonist and benefactor. The novel, through the fleeting flashbacks, reconstructs events as it narrates the gory details of the past violence. Somehow one feels cheated in the sweet ending in which there is a new romance and they all return to the sleepy rural Molo to rebuild their lives, symbolised by the new house and the reunion with the other two survivors.

Perhaps also as a result of the effect it has on the writer at a personal level, a significant part of the narration is merely the reportage of rumour which then takes over as the authoritative voice in the work. Some of these include: state organs complicit role in the violence i.e. well coordinated attacks and killings; the revenge attacks on individuals whose role was supposedly state-sponsored, and the suspicion of the use of well-trained and well-equipped warriors.

The five and Nancy are all in their youth and the violence not only robs them of their families but also cuts them off from the place they have known as home. Leaving Molo becomes an act of escape with the possibility of a new beginning.

The impact of the violence on the society is captured in the madness that one of the victims, Kirui, lapses into as a defence mechanism (p.72-73). Madness is the trope of the effects of trauma on a human mind driven to the very edge, reaching its limits and of course it snaps. Unfortunately, his dramatics are a painful reminder to the society, a picture of the precipice upon which they stand and upon which they could easily collapse into an abyss.

Negotiating Trauma: Victims and Victimhood

Cathy Caruth's 1996 seminal work recognizes the problematics of representation of trauma in the historical and literary fields and notes the multi-faceted nature of the problem. How to bring back to public prominence and view an event that had threatened to destroy a society and which still is the greatest threat to the uneasy tranquility of that society is definitely a matter that calls for a lot of reflection upon. In a sense this is what *The Last Villains* ... must confront and overcome. The actual violence and traumatic experiences are sporadic and throw people into panic and disorder, victims are caught unawares and forced into instinctive responses. The writer then must then attempt to capture this chaos even as he deals with the perspective that he is goading readers towards.

The writer's perspective in a work dealing with genocide is complicated by the rejection of a 'manichean tendency', which recognises a clear-cut position between the antagonistic and conflicting parties. The reality is that the concept of victim and perpetrator narrows down until it is collapsed into one. Often, the anger and hate blinds individuals and leads them to strike out inordinately at what they later realise are mirrors of themselves.

In *The Last Villains of Molo* the main characters, as well as the main architects of the current revenge mission, come head to head in a confrontation that is heavily laden with hate and the violence of the past. Nancy, Chebet and Rotich have meticulously schemed for the great and final revenge. The final resolution, however, takes a melodramatic path with Nancy, the main vehicle of the revenge plan, turning back to embrace Bone as she frees him from his planned execution and they both return to Molo to rebuild and start a new life as a couple.

The complexity in the way the genocide is realised and how binary descriptions of victimhood become deficient is partly stated by Bone. Although the three antagonists revel in the psychological torture they subject him to during the scene, his stoic response, not meant to absolve him, strongly alludes to the duality of victim/perpetrator of the masses of ordinary people.

“... I know the war was fuelled by other people who are now untouchable. What do you think would happen if everyone started thinking about revenge? There would be a civil war just like what happened in Rwanda. I lost my family in the clashes. Rock too, Bomu too, Bafu too. Will killing people right now bring them back?” (Kombani, 2004, p. 166).

Bone's articulation of the pain becomes the writer's way of moving the healing processes within the society towards a realisable goal. The three antagonists have allowed the pain and loss to possess and drive them, barely thinking outside this frame and singlemindedly pursuing revenge but, in so doing, they are the new perpetrators of violence. As noted earlier and from the blind rage, their first two victims are from their own ethnic group, the Kalenjin. In seeking revenge, they have been blinded into lashing out at anyone they see in their way. As they voice their pain, Nancy eventually releases the pent up fury that has kept her living in the past. Rescuing Bone from her uncle's evil scheme enables her accelerate her recovery and accept to bury the past.

The Return

Nancy and the surviving five's return to Molo where she reclaims her father's land and constructs a new house in which she starts life anew with Bone. Like Antigone in Sophocles' play *Antigone* who buries her brother Polynices against the orders of Creon who has prohibited the burial of those who rebelled and went to war against him, Nancy has returned to Molo in order to bury the past and come to terms with the present in order to build a future. She faces strong condemnation from her uncle Rotich and aunt Angelina who condemn her as a traitor and vow to continue with their mission of revenge. In Freudian terms the disappearance/reappearance, absence/return is a mechanism for overcoming the trauma of loss by enabling the actors to assign meaning to their condition through verbalisation and objectification and eventually therefore control. The condition of mastering loss and pain is therefore predicated on the return. In returning to Molo, Nancy and Bone undergo a therapeutic process which forces them into a confrontation with the original site of trauma and therefore an acceptance of the reality. This is mandatory for the psychological healing. It is similar to Freudian psychoanalysis where the patients are taken through a hypnotic state to the place, object or time of the traumatic experience and as they do so undergo a moment of agitation which in the controlled environment allows for acceptance and then overcoming. Although there are no expressions or worked out scenes of confrontation of the past or testimonies of confession from the former combatants now turned friends the four survivors

form a circle representing the new nation and vow to maintain it, suggesting the desire and resolve of this generation to rebuild their society. It is also significant that the Bone-Nancy marriage consummates the merging of the two biggest antagonists. The fragmentation of the nation is therefore overcome by this new wholeness.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Kinyanjui Kombani's *The Last Villains of Moloas* a representation of writing which deals with the societal trauma occasioned by genocidal events as witnessed within post independent East African countries. The literary works in which trauma is central, negotiate a delicate path as they attempt to heal the physical and psychological wounds through the reconstruction of the past. The perspective from which the writer chooses to reconstruct this narration is of significance to the whole project of healing a society. The writer also faces the daunting task of bringing together into one narrative the many discordant and opposed voices and for the work to succeed must move far beyond the creation of stereotypes and scapegoats. Each experience of trauma in each era and society is unique to that space, place and time and for writing to be realistic it must be able to walk the reader through the drama of their life without necessarily creating new antagonisms.

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