

# The Avenging and the Avenged Body: The Paradox of Revenge in Kinyanjui Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo*

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## Abstract

This article examines revenge as a response to trauma in Kinyanjui Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo* (2004). It explores the motivations and the goal for revenge and the effects of this revenge on both the perpetrators and the victims of violence and trauma, and those who carry out the revenge. The trauma from violence that is deemed intentional attracts fantasies of revenge, which is aimed at not only inflicting pain on those who harm them but also taking back the power, they feel that they have been robbed from. The article, therefore, examines the use of revenge as a response to the frustration of the body's inability to react "appropriately" at the time of the hurt and as a way of taking back power lost during traumatic situations by examining the effects of revenge on the avenger and the avenged. Using the ideas of Helsel, Etts, Horowitz, Grobbink, and Collens, among others, the article analyses revenge as a response to an injury that is deemed deliberate. Methodologically the article conducts a close textual analysis of the text to determine the trauma that the characters presented, their response to it at the time it occurred and their response later when they are considered physically and psychologically able to inflict retribution that equals their pain or one that exceeds the damage they once received, and further demonstrate the effect of revenge on those who carry out the revenge and the targets of the revenge. The findings reveal that the author presents revenge as a two-edged sword that affects both the perpetrator of this revenge and the victim.

**Key Words:** Revenge, The Body, Trauma, Violence, Marginalization

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## INTRODUCTION

Violence has marred Kenya's history since the colonial period. For decades, the types of violence experienced in Kenya have morphed from liberation struggles to land wars to election-related violence. According to Ndege (2009)

colonial set-up, save its racial trappings, was wholly inherited in the post-independence regime. The independent Kenya, he says, inherited and worsened the colonial crisis of governance with dire human rights consequences. Clan and clan-based violence was also used as a technology of power and became entrenched in state institutions (Anderson & Rolandsen, 2014). The types of violence that emerged in Kenya were mostly anchored on land issues. Unequal subdivision of land after the exit of the colonizers was the cause of discontent and eventually violence. Political leaders used their position in power to amass huge tracts of land for themselves and divide the rest among their kinsmen and their ethnic communities, and as a result, creating groups of landless and homeless people. According to Karinya (2009), the structure of land ownership reflects how power is held because concentration depends on economic and political influence, that is, the rules of control over ownership. Different ethnic communities thus waged war on one another, all in a bid to get land and eject other communities on 'their communal land'. The demand for multiparty democracy also contributed to the violence experienced in the early 1990s. Leaders who had been marginalized by President Moi sought alternative ways of articulating their demands by reintroducing multiparty democracy. These demands were, however, met with force, resulting in the violence which authors like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Meja Mwangi, Yvonne Odhiambo, and Kinyanjui Kombani, among others, have used to represent the history of violence in Kenya.

Kinyanjui Kombani in *The Last Villains of Molo* presents characters who use revenge to respond to the trauma they experienced during the 1992 clashes in Molo, Kenya. The novel deals with personal and communal trauma. It targets the actual cause of the victim's trauma: the perpetrators. It follows the individual lives of those who are subjected to trauma as they enact their revenge on the perpetrators of their trauma. The text also follows the lives of these perpetrators in a bid to help the reader and the victim understand the circumstances that necessitate the perpetrators to carry out these atrocities. It is centered on revenge, which is brought about by the desire to make the perpetrators of violence in Molo pay for the murders committed during the clashes. This paper thus examines revenge as a response to trauma and the motivations and the goal for revenge, and the effects of this revenge on both the perpetrators and the victims.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The human body responds to a traumatic experience differently. Using the ideas of Helsel, Etts, Horowitz, Grobbink and Collens, among others, the article examines revenge as a response to an injury that is deemed deliberate. Paula Collens (2006) terms revenge as an effective response that can be kindled when individuals feel that they have been hurt. While some people

have been known to respond quickly as an act of self-preservation, other people freeze. Helsel (2014), posits that trauma has a “shattering effect on the body’s response . . . to violations” (281). The traumatized body is overwhelmed by emotion, turning it impotent at the time the trauma is being experienced. As the traumatized person tries to process their trauma, they develop a hatred for themselves for not responding as they should have and hatred for their offender for harming them. Trauma from violence that is deemed intentional often attracts fantasies of revenge as a result of the victim’s hate for the person or people responsible for their trauma (Etts, 2008). Revenge fantasies, according to Horowitz (2007), occur in the “last phases of psychological response to trauma” (24), after shock, outcry, denial, and working-through phases. Horowitz continues to explain that the hatred towards the perpetrators, coupled with anger and self-disgust for allowing vulnerability, fuels the revenge fantasies. What is deemed as the body’s inability to respond to trauma becomes a psychological challenge to right that wrong.

The essence of revenge is to harm those that victims hold responsible for harming them by committing acts of violence against them in the same way they were inflicted or even worse (Power, 2022). The aim is to get even, tit for tat. Grobbink et al (2015) define revenge as “retaliatory behaviour following perceived harm to one’s well-being” (893). Schumann and Ross (2010) term revenge as a two-fold phenomenon that involves both an act and desire. Some victims of traumatic experiences have fantasies of revenge that they never act on, while others act on those desires by inflicting harm on their perceived offender(s). Revenge is always centered on feelings of bitterness or what Gabler and Maerker (2011) call “embitterment” (42). They explain that revenge is mostly anchored by an embitterment, which can be either “a co-occurring affective state or a motive underlying embitterment which spurs the urge to fight back” (43). Embitterment often occurs after traumatic events that are perceived as an injustice and a violation that leaves the victims feeling helpless. The desire that is bred by embitterment is to right the injustice by hurting the perpetrator(s) by taking revenge. For Power (2022), revenge is an act of frustration. It is compensation for the physical impotence that the harmed person felt at the time of their hurt.

While taking revenge at a later date, the assumption is that they are now equal or potentially equal to the one who harmed them. Revenge is, therefore, a response to the frustration of the body’s inability to react “appropriately” at the time of the hurt and thus an attempt to belatedly right that wrong. However, there is a thin line between revenge and vengeance. The two are differentiated based on the accompanying emotion: whether the victim wants retribution or to retaliate. Some view revenge as justice for the offence

committed while vengeance aims to inflict pain and make the target feel powerless and helpless (Etts, 2008). This article assesses Kombani's representation of revenge as a response to childhood trauma in his text. To this end, the article conducts a close textual analysis of the text to determine the trauma that the characters presented in the text, their response to it at the time it occurred and their response later when they are considered physically able to inflict retribution that equals their pain or one that exceeds the damage they once received, and further examine the effect of revenge on those who carry out the revenge and the targets of the revenge.

### **TRAUMA, ENACTMENT OF REVENGE, AND THE AMBIGUITY OF VENGEANCE**

Kombani tells a story in a back-and-forth formula that, according to Busolo (2019), signifies the fragmented nature of traumatic experiences. While this is true, the opinion in this article is that the back-and-forth nature of telling the story lays a foundation for the motivation for the revenge that the trauma victims undertake. It juxtaposes the characters in the present and who they were in the past. It presents the trauma of young "kids" going through traumatic situations of civil war against the perceived adults they have become and the scars they carry from their childhood traumas. The children's bodies are placed alongside their adult bodies, and the childhood traumas juxtaposed against adult traumas and responses as it takes its readers back and forth from Ng'ando to Molo to Ndoinet. Every time this is done, the reader gets a clearer picture of who the characters are and what they have been through.

Revenge in Anglophone literature dates back to revenge tragedies in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods (Torghabeh, 2018). These tragedies were mostly plays that dramatized protagonists who sought revenge for murder or betrayal. This revenge was characterized by murder, as the revenge itself was based on a "blood for blood" phenomenon (Torghabeh 2018, 235). The most popular early tragedies include Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Mulfi*, and Cyril Turner's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, just to name but a few. These plays portray revenge as being motivated by the search for justice. The avenger feels it is their sacred duty to avenge their own or others' injustice. The crime committed by the target of this revenge is revealed through the appearance of the ghost of the murdered person. Revenge, in this case, is attributed to the showing up of a murdered body that is supposed to remind the living person of the wrongs inflicted against the dead and their desire for justice. This revelation serves to arouse sympathy for the avenger. The revenge plays are often tragic, though, because of the effect that the

revenge has on the avenger or his family. Revenge, in this case, is revealed as not just being a psychological desire but a physical undertaking as well. As much as the wronged can dream and plot, the revenge plan is not complete until it is executed. That implies elaborate plans by the aggrieved body to exert their revenge on their offender. Revenge is, therefore, only complete when the offender has been made to undergo both psychological and physical agony.

Revenge as a motif in fiction has evolved over the years. Fictional texts on war, for example, especially in Africa where most literary writing deals with stories of civil war, genocide and political wars, represent victims of traumatic situations as struggling with the effects that these situations have on them and their feelings of helplessness and shame. Many representations of trauma though inflicted on the physical body, however, present the victims as having deep psychological wounds that incapacitate them and make it hard for them to function well. The functionality of these victims is associated with their physical abilities; and what the body can do. Kinyanjui Kombani in *The Last Villains of Molo*, seems to be challenging this portrayal of the victim as being helpless and powerless. Kombani presents revenge as a mechanism that the victims use to challenge their feelings of powerlessness and instead use it as a way of coping with trauma. It is a psychological and physical response to trauma. The text represents traumatic experiences that spark not only the fantasies of revenge but also portray how the victims of these traumas act on those fantasies and hunt down their perpetrators.

The novel opens with a scene from Ndoinet forest where a young girl watches her father hacked to death as she helplessly stares at the attackers.

There were two men in the sitting room. One stood with a poised machete and the other was collecting himself. She gasped when she saw her father convulsing on the floor. Blood was gushing out of a deep cut in his neck, and he was shaking violently. An incoherent flow of guttural sounds escaped from his frothing mouth. Her whole body still in shock, she bent down. (vi)

Nancy finds herself helpless, unable to fight the attackers and unable to save her father. Her young body is deemed immobile, helpless and cannot respond to trauma as it “should”. All she can do is stare back at the attackers with an indifference that can only be interpreted as her body’s way of fighting back by not giving the attackers the satisfaction of seeing her fear or vulnerability. Nancy’s frustrations are accentuated by the fact that she cannot physically fight. The fact that she stands still is attributed to the fact that her traumatized body cannot respond to the experience and therefore her immobility further emphasizes her vulnerability on the one hand because of her physical inadequacies and on the other hand, because of trauma’s effect on the

physical body. Psychological trauma as a result of witnessing a traumatic event paralyzes the physical body, leading to an inability to respond. Fear that is associated with physical inadequacies and helplessness that are associated with childhood is replaced with hate. While the rest of her body seems to the perpetrators as vulnerable, Nancy's gaze and thus her demeanor communicate defiance; a refusal to bow down and hatred for her traumatizers. Kombani describes Nancy's emotions and demeanor as she watches her father slowly fade:

She looked from her fallen father to the intruders, her heart quickly filling with hatred. These were the two attackers who had done this to her father, her protector ... as their eyes met, the hatred in her hit the two attackers like a cold blade of steel (vi, vii).

This hatred which is a psychological response to both physical and psychological trauma becomes the driving force for the revenge that Nancy and her uncles take on the five friends: Bone, Rock, Bomu, Bafu and Ngeta; the Slaughterhouse Five as referred to by their neighbours. It is noteworthy that Nancy and her uncles blame the Kikuyu for their misfortunes, and therefore their targets should be Bone (Kimani) and Rock (Irungu). However, they also target the Kalenjin: Bomu (Kibet) and Bafu (Kiprop) together with their Luhya friend Ngeta (Lihanda) whom they view as enemies by association. Taking revenge on the traumatizing body is Nancy's way of taking back the control she lost years ago. The revenge plan is not just psychological but also physical. It therefore has to bind the body and mind.

A character like Kirui, on the other hand, does not get to exact his revenge because of how his trauma affects him. Most traumatized individuals are unable to enact their desire for revenge because of their physical inadequacies or their dependence on their traumatizers. Etts (2008) argues that by planning vengeance, the victim experiences pleasure at imagining their perpetrator and consequently the target of their revenge suffering and experiencing the same powerlessness they once felt. However, most of the victims of trauma do not get to carry out their revenge because the trauma is too much for them to recover from or because some of these victims get help and can move past the urge for revenge, into a place of healing. In the case of children or even child soldiers who are dependent on those who traumatized them, they are aware of the grave consequences their attempt to exert revenge will have on their lives. In other cases, however, the trauma is so overwhelming that the victims still feel trapped in their bodies. Kirui, for example, is one character who has to watch his wife being raped to death. He cannot protect her from this ordeal, and cannot protect his children from having to witness it, because he has been pinned down. The men who pin him down also force him to

watch, and though he struggles to break free, the attackers have the strength of numbers:

The whole family watched as their mother was raped in turns. Kirui was propped up to see it all, the agonized voice of his wife, her anguished face, the bloody mess on the floor, the frightened faces of the children, everything! He saw the sardonic grins on the attackers' faces as they humiliated him (83).

Kirui here is trapped, powerless and helpless. He is stripped of his power as the protector of the home thus emasculated. By pinning his body down, the attackers are taking his power away and this helplessness leaves an imprint on the brain. The physical inadequacies at the time trauma is experienced, loop itself in the mind of its victims and keep replaying themselves long after the trauma is experienced. This is the brain trying to figure out how else the victim could have responded differently. Being the head of the family and therefore the protector, his job was to keep his family safe; the fact that he could not do it, haunts him endlessly. Kirui's problem, however, is the body's inability to act in tandem with the mind. While the mind fantasizes about facing the trauma, the body remains immobile, thus further illuminating helplessness. When all his family is gone, his body is still stuck in the psychological trauma and does not realize that he has already been released and is therefore free. The mental and physical freedom for Kirui becomes synonymous in a way. It is then no wonder that Kirui is still reliving the moment. He is seen running from one end of the market to another, screaming 'taref' (help). He is seemingly stuck in a loop as if experiencing the trauma repeatedly, and is still helpless.

Nancy, on the other hand, gets to act on her fantasies of revenge. She replaces her feelings of helplessness with feelings of anger and rage towards the perpetrators. Etts (2008) argues that by planning vengeance, the victim experiences pleasure at imagining their perpetrator and consequently the target of their revenge suffering and experiencing the same powerlessness they once felt. The five villains: Bone, Rock, Bomu, Bafu and Ngeta have gone through their own fair share of trauma during the clashes. The five are unlikely bedfellows because they come from the two communities fighting but to survive, they must now put their differences aside and stick together. However, they cannot live in their community because they will be viewed as traitors and killed. They have to relocate and change their names. Changing their identities is not just an attempt to protect themselves from retaliation but also to distance themselves from their traumatic experiences by giving new identities to their bodies. As such, they never get anyone close to them and never use their real names. They seem aware of their actions and live in fear of what people might think of them if they knew their real names, where they are from and what they have done. Secrecy is, therefore, key to

not only keeping their names a secret or changing their identities however superficially, but also keeping their past a secret – it is an act of defending their bodies from experiencing the kind of hate and retaliation they know is possible.

The Slaughterhouse Five adopt a rebellious lifestyle and attitude not only to survive in a world where life is rigged against them but also to scare away people and keep them from getting too close to know them and learn about their past. Bloom (1999) explains that victims of trauma tend to dissociate themselves from any form of emotion. The characters also adopt a dissociative lifestyle. This dissociative style is a physical response to psychological trauma. By keeping themselves from the public gaze, they are keeping a mystery of who they really are and therefore making the fear of the unknown terrifying. “The residents knew nothing about the five-man group that stuck together like Super Glue and rubber. They didn’t even know where they had come from. They had never told anyone the meaning of their strange nicknames or revealed their real names. It was really strange” (21). The fear of what might happen if people find out who the Slaughterhouse Five are and what they have done keeps them hostile, as hostility is the only way they can feel powerful. For them, the fear of the repercussions against the physical body is more threatening than the trauma of their past.

The engagement in “irresponsible” sexual behaviour and drugs, is the body’s way of numbing the psychological processes associated with trauma. Ngeta is a mugger, Bone is a wannabe artist who turns murderer to defend his friend, Bafu is a con artist, Bomu is a tout who loves to smoke bhang, and Rock stole money from the 1998 bomb blast and used it to start a business. This risky behaviour of the Slaughterhouse Five as they are referred to in the neighbourhood is one of the effects of trauma. Bloom (2018) terms it as ‘self-harming behaviour and addiction’ (16) by arguing that:

People ‘turn to substances, like drugs or alcohol, or behaviours like sex, over-eating, gambling, engagement in violence, and self-injury, all of which help them to calm down, at least temporarily in part because of the major, self-induced shift in internal body chemistry that accompanies substance abuse and self-harming behaviour’ (16).

This behaviour is adopted as a form of numbing from the trauma that both victims and perpetrators of violence have experienced. The neighbours are scared of the five and to ensure their safety and that of their children, they send a girl to their room to talk to them about irresponsible sexual behaviour in the hope that the change in their lifestyle will keep them and their children safe. The girl is, however, harassed because for them the only way they can feel powerful is by inflicting fear on those around them. They capitalize on



the girl's sexuality and use it to embarrass her so that they do not have to deal with their issues.

"You know". He said "If I were you, I wouldn't waste my youth telling people to beware...you have such nice legs", She gave him a horrified look.

Yeah, Bafu concurred. "If I had such legs..."

She flew out, livid with anger, trying to shut out the slaughter of the men in the slaughterhouse". (31)

The female body again here is sexualized and traumatized by being objectified.

The five friends stick together as if with an unspoken vow to keep their secrets. The trauma of what they have gone through also inspires recklessness. The house they live in is referred to as a 'slaughterhouse', a "den of inequities" (27), because "a lot of activities which would interest the police took place there" (27). The characters also participate in very dangerous activities, including "group sex, the orgies, the alcohol binges, and the fights" (197) just to numb their trauma.

Nancy and her uncle, by proxy, use the female body as a tool to enact revenge. Ziegler (2012) describes the female body as being instrumental in enacting vengeance. The female body, she deems, can be weaponized to disarm their opponent. In the masculine eyes, women are sexual beings, nurturers, beautiful, innocent, and modest and can only be used in serving masculine sexual needs. Nancy plays into this narrative of femininity and beauty, but by portraying the strong, independent woman, she is playing into Bone's ego, who is already seen to be attracted to strong-willed women like Stella. Her comings and goings are attributed to the male gender's unpredictability, while being able to stay feminine and at the same time financing their lifestyle grants her a standing ground. Her ability to switch from vulnerability to strength resonates with a group that is known to detach from the world when need be and still maintain her "identity" as a woman and therefore, in Bone's eyes, remain feminine. Bone's friends are disarmed by Nancy's perceived "down-to-earth" portrayal of herself, even though she seems rich. Her body and the different emotions that she can conjure from it grant her the power over the five men, making it easy for her to take her vengeance.

In this same regard, Nancy's uncle uses Nancy and Angelina's bodies as weapons. Although Nancy is the one who is directly affected by the trauma, her uncle Rotich, together with her guardian who lives abroad, finances the operations of the revenge. Nancy is kept out of the loop and just takes the orders. Rotich recruits Angelina Chebet to help with the execution of this revenge plan. He capitalizes on Angelina's hatred for those she blames for

her misfortunes “She is an easy target as she blames the Kikuyu for her new life as a “barmaid and a part-time prostitute” (122). It is then easy for Rotich to manipulate her by offering her the opportunity and means to enact revenge on her “enemies”. The woman’s body and in Chebet’s case, the nature of her job makes her an easy target for the male body to manipulate. Rotich asks Chebet; “What would you do if you had a chance to get even with those who ruined your life?” (122). O’Neill (2011) contends that revenge narratives represent manliness as a highly prized commodity that individuals acquire through retaliatory acts of violence, exposing the performative nature of gender by the male characters. Female ones are only seen as pawns. These male characters are seen not to be directly affected by the violence or the trauma and seem to be acting on communal memory with no regard for what the individual female characters experience. This kind of self-fashioning fabricates his masculinity (the power wielded by the male body).

The revenge in Kinyanjui Kombani’s *The Last Villains of Molo* is portrayed as a man’s agenda. It is choreographed and run by the male characters while women are only given limited information and for the most part, kept in the dark or threatened when they fail to follow orders. Nancy has the first-hand experience of this trauma as she is orphaned by the clashes. She feels marginalized because of the community that she hails from which is no fault of her own. The female is only recruited to serve the purpose of the alpha male, carefully chosen because of their vulnerability and what they have gone through. The male, therefore, calls the shots from a distance and is seemingly unscathed by the effects of this revenge. While trying to avenge her father’s death, Nancy is still kept out of the loop, which makes the revenge seem distant to her.

Revenge is paradoxical since as much as it aims to maim those who caused harm, it also affects those who enact it. The avenger in most tragedies is humanized because of what they have gone through and revenge is made to feel like it is their only option. Even while their quest for revenge always goes bad, the reader still feels remorse for the avenger for having been made to go through that on top of everything they have already gone through. However, the gruesomeness of the form of revenge that the avenger chooses seems to accentuate the gravity of the pain that they feel. The revenge that is seen to be carried out in *The Last Villains of Molo*, does not seem to come from the person who is directly affected by the trauma. It is planned by those who seem to be projecting hatred for the community that they consider as the “Other” and therefore should not have had the privileges that it did or should not have retaliated to protect themselves from the kind of violence that was meted on them. Rotich and Chebet are not directly affected by the civil war. Chebet’s problem is losing her business is as a result of the aggressiveness of

the Kikuyus. Rotich is not even presented as being present in Molo at the time of the clashes but rather just shows up at the end of the clashes. He views his quest for revenge as a duty and a show of loyalty to the community. For them, therefore, Bomu and Bafu's friendship with those they consider as the enemies of the community is a greater betrayal and for Chebet who is a distant relative of the boys, she views it as a duty. They have to die for supporting "the other" community. Bomu who is Chebet's nephew is beaten and burnt to death after being framed by Chebet for stealing six thousand shillings from her. Bafu on the other hand is also framed for bank robbery and is consequently executed by the police. Rotich, however, thinks that watching the pain that Bone goes through as a result of losing all of his friends die before he is killed himself is the biggest revenge ever. At some point, it stops being revenge but vengeance since it is no longer about retribution but simply inflicting pain that will render Bone helpless and powerless.

Similarly, Nancy also fears that the revenge has moved from reprisal to vengeance. Towards the end of the text Nancy is portrayed as having doubts about the results of their revenge plan on several occasions. She asks her uncle Rotich; "did you really have to do it?" (155), "Is it really necessary? I don't like it, at all, at all" (162). The revenge here is not just affecting those that it is directed at but also the one who is enacting it. While Nancy is having second thoughts, she does not have the luxury to abandon the "project" (163). She is traumatized by what the community would do to her if she went against them, "I don't know what to do next. They will probably kill us both" (198). At this point, her loyalty to the plan is anchored not just on her desire to see her enemies pay for what they have done to her and her family but also by the fear of what might happen to her if she decides to side with or forgive her target. Her fear for her life, therefore, supersedes any kind of remorse she might feel for her target or even the love that she feels for Bone. This in itself is even more traumatic than watching the death of her father. The characters in the novel are therefore shown as using revenge to respond to their trauma. However, the author presents revenge as a two-edged sword that affects both the perpetrator of this revenge and the victim. Revenge presents the reverse roles of the perpetrators of violence and their victims, as victims now turn perpetrators and perpetrators turn victims, and though it numbs victims' feelings, it is not a solution to trauma.

## CONCLUSION

Based on our analysis above on how Kinyanjui Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo* deals with revenge and vengeance, we have reached the conclusion that marginalization inspires violence, which is not only used by dominant groups to exert dominance and power but is also, at times, used by the victimized as a method of self-preservation and as a response to

marginalization. For others, traumatic experiences render their bodies impotent; unable to react to the experience in the moment it is experienced. The helplessness and lack of control that accompany traumatic experiences delay the body and mind's response. The trauma of not being able to respond "appropriately" is traumatic and sometimes breeds desires for revenge to put right the wrong committed against the victim or to compensate for the body's inability to react. Elaborate revenge plans thus aim to exert similar pain or even more on the perpetrator, with the hope that it will give back control. Revenge, however, is paradoxical because it does not just affect the person receiving it but also the person enacting it.

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