

Book Review

The Last Villains of Molo

Natasha Himmelman

The Last Villains of Molo (2004)

Author: K. Kombani

Publisher: Acacia Publishers

My friend and roommate at Kenyatta University, Peter Muia, was a victim of the ethnic clashes in the Rift Valley. The incidents of his childhood have affected him so much he cannot sleep with the lights in the room turned off.¹

[R]esearch on Africa has literally impoverished our understanding of [...] what it means to be a subject in contexts of instability and crisis.²

[W]hat I had to say back then today feels jaded, naive and foolish as is any attempt to capture public life in this country beyond the span of a few weeks. The certainties, ideas and chest-thumping of August 2008 are dust motes and vapours. I wake up to the Kenyan morning and look around, and the new day seems to forgive the recent past, mostly because the public life is one of amnesiac collusion, a physical fact without regret or hope. So I start again.³

Although Kinyanjui Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo* was published officially in 2004, the novel was not launched until 26 March 2008, following post-election violence in Kenya. Since its launching, however, the book has garnered attention for what some have read as "prophesy"⁴ and others as "far-seeing."⁵ Contextualizing this reception, John Mwazemba explains, "The recent events in the wake of the post-election violence give the story a new sense of urgency. The novel hits the reader with prophetic force."⁶ Drawing from his own experiences of the 1992 "Tribal Clashes" in Molo, as well as his subsequent life in Ng'ando ⁷ *The Last Villains of Molo* has an uncanny resonance in Kenya today.

The structure of Kombani's novel complements this temporal, as well as spatial, "conversation", if you will. The book opens in "Ndoinet Forest, Molo, 1992" and is followed by a chapter from "Nairobi, 2001." The book continues in this manner, enabling readers to make connections between seemingly disparate times and places. For readers based in Kenya, the 2007 election violence adds a

layer to this conversation, reinforcing and contradicting the texts and archives created and evoked in *The Last Villains of Molo*. In this way, the novel engages with what Achille Mbembe (2001) has termed as the “time of entanglement.” Referring to the epigraphs above, the time of entanglement is the very real presences of past violences that prevent Peter Muia from sleeping with the lights off, as well as the recent past that Billy Kahora describes as “dust motes and vapours.” The past is both debilitating present, and outdated and forgotten.

Like time, Kombani represents place as entangled, bringing his characters anywhere from N’gando’s Slaughterhouse to middle class Nairobi’s Imara Daima. Adding to the entanglement, the Nairobi youth culture the author imagines is a palimpsest of texts, especially evident in excerpts from hip hop groups K-South, Kalamashaka, and Mashifta, not to mention the use of Sheng threaded throughout the novel. These texts and subtexts serve as a historical archive, remembering, evoking and bearing witness to Nancy and the Slaughterhouse Five.

In seeming conversation with the work of Mahmood Mamdani, Kombani also represents rural Kenya - Molo - as archive. The signifiers and signifieds of the Molo of 1992 remain buried in the Nairobi of 2001 until Nancy’s appearance at the Los Angeles Club. Kombani complicates the rural archive, mixing it with “been to” privilege. In the end, Kombani imagines “the last villains of Molo” as a new generation of Kenyan citizens who have reconciled urban and rural histories, creating new subjectivities and new archives. While this conclusion is unquestionably idealistic, it situates its optimism with Nairobi youth, daring them to dream alongside Nancy and Bone.

The Last Villains of Molo is a gritty, hip novel that deftly captures “what it means to be a subject in contexts of instability and crisis”. A fictional archive of Molo, 1992, it also provides insights into the events of 2007/2008 and imagines a way forward.

Notes

¹ Dedication in K. Kombani. *Last Villains of Molo*. (Nairobi: Acacia Publishers, pb, KES 350, ZAR 35 - 9966 917 41 (1) 2004), p.186

² Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

³ B. Kahora. 2009. "Editorial: The Fire Next Time OR A Half-Made Place: Between Tetra Paks and Plastic Bags." *Kwani? 5.2*. Nairobi: Kwani Trust.

⁴ Mwazemba, John. 2008. "Novelist Prophesied Post-Election Chaos." The Standard Online. www.eastandard.net. Accessed 15 Oct 2009.

⁵ Wagacha, Kui. 2009. "The Last Villains of Molo by Kinyanjui Kombani - a Review." Capital FM, Lifestyle, www.capitalfm.co.ke, Accessed 15 Oct 2009.

⁶ Mwazemba, 2008, p.2

⁷ HeadStylist. 2008. "Kinyanjui Kombani." *Sunday Salon*. www.sundaysalon.com/kinyanjui-kombani.htm. Accessed 15 Oct 2009.