

Human Rights and Displacement in Literature: The Case of M. Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* and K. Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo*

by

Anna Kula

kulamiti@gmail.com

Lecturer, Department of literature
Kenyatta University, Nairobi - Kenya

Abstract

This work aims to explore the relationship between literature and human rights with a hypothesis that literature is a vehicle for enhancing human rights through its condemnation of violations, and thus, the focus is on two novels – Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* and Kinyanjui Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo* – in an effort to demonstrate that they are interested in the issues of human rights, particularly, human rights issues in an area of displacement. The basic argument is that displacement uproots people from their habitual homes where they have high chances of fulfilling their human rights and later abandons them wherein they are rootless in a new environment where they are prone to abuse. The discussion shows that circumstances force characters in both novels to move from their rural homes to the lure of the city which promises that in new environment, their rights will be fulfilled, however, they are displaced in the environment as they can hardly meet their basic needs or afford decent standards of living.

Key words: human rights, displacement, literature

Introduction

Commenting on the urgency of human rights discourse, Eleni Coundouriotis and Lauren Goodlad (2010) observe that 'human rights will remain central to many contemporary debates – from the global economy to the environment, gay marriage, human trafficking, and cultural and religious nationalism' (p. 121). Discourse on human rights in the recent past has tended to take on a multi-disciplinary approach. As such it is important to explore the nature of relationship between literature and human rights, the pertinent issue in this case being what literary studies can contribute to scholarship on human rights?

Existing scholarship has linked developments in human rights discourse to literature especially the narrative forms – the novel, memoir and testimony.¹ Henkin as cited by Chanda (1998, p. 71) defines human rights as those benefits deemed essential for individual well-being, dignity and fulfilment, and that reflect a common sense of justice, fairness and decency. Since literature strives to improve human well-being, it is thus seen as embodying human rights and as articulating violation or promotion of these rights. To this end, this work agrees with James Dawes (2009) that human rights work, especially advocacy, entails story-telling. If we take this to be the case then, we can naturally argue that the narrative genres play an important part in intervening in issues of human rights.

Kerry Bystrom (2008), points out the capability of imaginative literature to ‘create bonds of empathy and connection, draw national and international attention to human rights abuses, and denounce the exclusion of certain individuals and groups from the protections afforded by international human rights law’ (p. 388). In the same vein, Ben Davis (2015) suggests that literature is a means of encountering other people’s stories, of fostering empathy, and inspiring imagination. For Davis, literature can open one’s eyes to the reality of others and to a realisation that humanity shares one world. Both Bystrom and Davis imply the concept of literary humanitarianism, the idea that ‘the reader may fulfil a humanitarian act by reading a story of suffering’ (Rickel 2012, p. iv). That literature is a vehicle of humanitarianism is a key idea in this presentation.

Rickel (2012) further posits that human rights are a dominant framework through which we narrate and read political violence in contemporary literature concerning Africa, the Caribbean, and the Indian subcontinent (p. iii). But while the language of human rights as enshrined in the law and international human rights documents is a preserve of the elite, I agree with Javangwe and Tagwirei (2013) that literature does free human rights discourse off the legalese, making it accessible to the ordinary citizens. Therefore, the reader of a novel can interact with human rights without the burden that comes with legalistic terms.

It is against this background, of the relationship between literature and human rights, that I propose to analyse the theme of human rights in areas of displacement in the two novels. The contribution presupposes the knowledge that literature provides challenge to dominant ideologies, that literature can portray both violation and defence of human rights, and that literature communicates societal values. In all these three roles, there is no gainsaying the fact that literature is a direct participant in human rights discourse.

Displacement

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement defines internally displaced persons as persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border. While this definition gives prominence to violence and conflict as the major causes of internal displacement, there are other reasons that force people to move from the residential homes and even find it difficult to return to these homes. Lucy Kiama and Fredrick Koome (2014) list the causes of displacement in Kenya: the colonial thirst for land, the punishing effects of global warming, development-related displacement, clan clashes, cattle rustling and politically motivated violence. The history of displacement in Kenya thus goes back to 1915 when Kenyan masses were displaced from their land and forced to work in European-owned farms. Displacement has its own attendant risks; Michael Cernea (1997) outlines the major impoverishment risks in displacement as follows: landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, morbidity, food insecurity, loss of access to common property assets, social disarticulation and education loss.² Cernea's list reinforces a key argument here: that displacement avails an environment that favours violations of human rights.

Human rights and displacement in *Kill Me Quick* and *The Last Villains of Molo*

This **paper** relies on a reading of the two novels as social documents, which can contribute to our understanding of displacement as a human rights issue. Drawing on two novels – Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* (1973) and Kinyanjui Kombani's *The Last Villains of Molo* (2004) – I demonstrate that what would be popularly referred to as the theme of displacement in socio-political reading of these novels is indeed an exploration of issues of human rights within areas to which characters are displaced. In literary terms, these areas are the settings, the locations of the narratives. I use the two novels published three decades apart to show that in cases of displacement, despite the reason for it, the characters suffer relatively the same human rights abuses.

The two novels have Nairobi city as a setting and an area of displacement for characters. The writers take the characters from as a rural set up to an urban one where differentiation among people is pronounced; this is a strategy to aid the writers in their focus on injustices the characters face as such injustices are common where class differences are significant. As Joseph Slaughter (2004) observes, the city is a constant compulsion for the characters to move into it. In *Kill Me Quick*, the characters move into the city in search of paid employment after completing secondary school education.

The novel was written in the wake of urbanisation where rural-urban migration caused displacement of rural population into urban areas. Even though this movement appears voluntary, circumstances force the characters to move from their habitual homes in search of employment. The main characters, Maina and Meja, find it difficult to return to their rural homes. It is indisputable that these characters are displaced. In *The Last Villains of Molo*, the characters move because ethnic conflict displaces them from their rural homes in Molo to other areas, the city being one of these areas.

Violations of Human Rights in Displacement

The characters in the two novels hope that the movement to the city will ensure fulfilment of their rights: for Maina and Meja it is the fulfilment of their right to employment whereas for Kimani, Kiprop, Irungu, Lihanda and Kibet³, the city is a haven of peace away from their antagonistic ethnic groups. Displaced from their familiar environments however, the characters become vulnerable to human rights abuses. The first of these is their inability to secure paid employment in the city. In *Kill Me Quick* the city confronts them with 'No Vacancy' signs. Maina is the first to look for employment and getting none; he accepts unemployment as a norm. Meja becomes so desperate and frustrated that he pleads with prospective employers for a job that can pay even as little as twenty shilling or anything the employer would be willing to pay him. Thus, in his desperation he gives a prospective employer power to oppress him by paying him anything. He pleads, 'I can...sweep and wash dishes and...chop wood....Any job...thirty...twenty...anything you like' (Mwangi 1973, p. 8). Contrary to their expectation to get employment, Maina and Meja get to a cul-de-sac in their journey; their right to employment is unfulfilled and by implication, they lack the means of fulfilling their rights to decent food, shelter and clothing as they expected.

The characters in *The Last Villains of Molo* go through similar experiences. Their education is discontinued by the fact of their displacement. Kimani and Irungu hoped to complete their primary school education and get initiated but their hopes are dashed by the clashes. Without sufficient formal education the characters thus lack a prerequisite to paid employment. They try their hands on several skill-related jobs. Bone tries music; Kiprop tries football; Rock has a small shop; Bomu is a *matatu* tout while Ngeta (as his name in Sheng' suggests) can only mug people to survive in the city. Evidently, for the five characters in *The Last Villains of Molo*, infamously known as the Slaughterhouse Five, have their rights to education and employment violated in their experience of displacement.

Without meaningful means of livelihood, the characters suffer lack of basic needs. They cannot meet their daily requirement for food. Rock explains that at a camp in Limuru where he and his mother are first displaced once clashes break out in Molo, food was scarce; they depended on 'hand-outs from the church and other well-wishers' (Kombani 2004, p. 110) and were not sure where they will get their next meal. He further observes that when they arrived at Kwa Mbira Camp in Limuru, 'getting food on the table was really difficult' (p. 114). Rock is here suggesting that displacement uproots people from the land and home where there are stocks of food ('granary') to sustain life and abandons them in unfamiliar place where it is difficult for them to support life. Noteworthy, is the gesture of church and well-wishers in giving hand-outs; their acts constitute humanitarianism which is an affirmation of human rights.

Likewise Maina and Meja in *Kill Me Quick* have their right to food denied them. To begin with, they eat stale food. As Graebner (1992) observes, they 'live from waste' (p. 142) collected from dustbins or back alleys. Human beings consider this food as waste; they consider it unfit for human consumption and dispose it off. Feeding on it implies that Maina and Meja no longer live as human beings. The story provides us with a graphic description of the kind of food available to Maina and Meja and their scavenging survival tactics. The imagery in the description of Maina and Meja's food engages our senses in such a way that we can see food in the process of decay and oranges which are deathly grey; we can smell the food; we can taste its staleness; and feel its hardness as evident in 'rock-hard' and 'fragments of rock':

There were various kinds of fruits in various stages of decay. There were also slices of stale smelly bread and a few dusty chocolate. Some rock-hard cakes glared stonily back at them...the oranges were no longer orange and beautiful but a deathly grey with mould. The cakes were no longer cakes but fragments of rock, and the chocolate looked like discarded shoe polish. (Mwangi 1973, p. 1)

The result of the narrative voice focusing to such length and depth on the details of Maina and Meja eating dirt causes our repulsiveness to the description. I disagree with Ayo Kehinde's view that Mwangi dwells on the sordid details to compel the reader take a sympathetic view of the plight of the masses (Kehinde 2004). Instead, the sordid details appal rather than marshal sympathy for Maina and Meja. It is however indisputable that their right to healthy food is unmet.

Similarly the characters fail to fulfil their rights to shelter and security. Maina and Meja sleep in the streets exposed to cold and rainy weather. They wait for policemen to leave the streets so that they can get into large supermarket bins which make their house. The narrator tells us how they are uncomfortable in these bins due to the foul smell from the rotten vegetables.

They are worried when it begins to rain because ‘by the time it stopped [it] would leave all the culverts and bins flooded beyond habitation’ (Mwangi 1973, p. 13). That they sleep in the streets, in bins, and even find it difficult to secure this street “housing” shows denial of their right to decent housing. Additionally, the streets expose the characters to other forms of human rights violations: it is in the streets that Bafu is sodomised by adult men, an act that inflicts pain and violates his dignity.

During their short stay working at the white man’s farm, Maina and Meja are exposed to dehumanising housing conditions. Contrary to the promise that the white man would give them accommodation, they live in huts infested with fleas, bed bugs and rats with roofs caving in and the floor rough and a foot deep into fine dust. They therefore cohabit with animals fighting with rats over food remains in the hut an act that reduces them to the level of rodents which they refer to as ‘friends’ and ‘brothers’ (Mwangi 1973, p. 44). The narrative voice’s description of a fight between Maina and Meja on one side, and the rats on the other, evokes animal imagery:

The dark hut was left to the big fat rats to command. They stormed and looted the rack where the tin lamp lay forlornly among the unwashed plates and pots. When the plates were clean, they raged through the hut gobbling anything that was edible. Then they started looking for a way under the blankets to the horny feet of the sleepers...one of the beasts charged in. There was a scuffle under the blanket. Meja leaped to his feet and shook the rat free. (pp. 36-7)

Animal imagery occurs elsewhere in the story: the two describe themselves as competing with mongrels in scavenging for food in the back streets, and, the narrator captures Meja’s desperation for employment by the use of ‘bleat’. When asked about his qualification Meja says, ‘First Division, School Certificate’ (p.7) to which the narrator adds as speech tag, ‘Meja bleated’ (p.7). Bleating is for goats and sheep, not for humans. The animal imagery serves to show that Maina and Meja live like animals without rights to be fully human.

Kombani’s Slaughterhouse five live in squalor, housed in a dirty iron sheet room with a rickety door, which they popularly refer to as the Slaughterhouse. Mosquitoes which are a health hazard ‘breed in the filth out there’ (Kombani 2001, p. 18) and invade the room. The household items in the Slaughterhouse symbolise the austere life lived by the occupants: there is only one bed, three stools, a sooty stove and a pile of dirty dishes. This is all there is to share among the five members of the house. The toilet that serves the Slaughterhouse is dirty, smelly and leaning on one side. Bone states that it ‘caters for fifty or so houses’ (p. 43). Thus, it is not only in poor condition but also inadequate. There are also some places where there are no toilets at all and people, as Bone says, use ‘Choo FM, that is Choo flying method’ (p. 43) in which human waste is put in a polythene bag then thrown in the air.

This waste lands somewhere and pollutes the environment becoming a health hazard. Bone discusses the case of toilets pessimistically, without the seriousness it deserves as he seems at home with the situation; Nancy's reactions, however, make it clear that the state of the toilets does not meet the expected standards for human beings. The Slaughterhouse five and the Gando residents are thus denied their right to decent standard of living.

Displacement equally denies the characters the capability to afford decent clothing. All the characters of focus in the two novels experience this challenge. At the camp of displaced persons in Limuru, Rock and his mother are exposed to extreme cold as they lack adequate clothing and shelter. They 'slept hunched up on thin blankets that did not keep out the Limuru cold' (Kombani 2004, p. 110). Moreover, Maina and Meja's clothing tells of their poverty, of the infringement of the right to adequate clothing. The clothes that they go to the city in gradually degenerate into tatters, exposing parts of their bodies. At the time Boi finds the two in the streets to recruit them for the white man's employment, they are dressed in rags which expose their dirty bodies. These clothes clearly symbolise poverty.

The characters are not only materially deprived but also socially alienated. The stay in the city severs links with their families in their rural homes. They are cut from meaningful relationships with their families and in this way they are denied a sense of belonging. In *Kill Me Quick*, Maina and Meja decide not to back to the rural homes for fear that their families will not accept them. Maina says that without money to buy a blanket for his father and an overcoat for his mother he cannot go home. He condemns himself to the miserable life of the city, almost choosing death over going back home: 'I would only go back if I got a job. Then I would buy a blanket for my father [and] an overcoat for my mother... Believe me or not, until I get a job, I may as well be dead. It is no use being alive if I cannot help them' (Mwangi 1973, p. 32). He has despaired of any hope of re-uniting with his family. When he finally goes home, he finds that his father had sold off the house and the piece of land where he had left them and relocated to unknown place. He is frustrated by the failure of a reunion; as a result he kills a couple for not letting him into their house. Meja too goes home but fails to re-unite with his family for fear that he has no money to meet their needs; he feels hopeless, helpless and useless that he cannot buy his younger sister a blue necklace and pay her school fees. The narrator captures Meja's fears through an introspection into his thoughts and feelings; we see his inside view and sympathise with him that he is only a short distance from home but his fears cannot let him re-unite with his family: 'He thought about his mother at home cooking for the children and his father gone to beg for school fees...he was scarred and afraid of going home. He dared not face them...Would they understand how he failed to get a job?' (p. 112) This then is a cul-de-sac in the story; the journey home is fruitless. Societal expectation of these characters and their own pessimism deny them their right to be with their families.

In *The Last Villains of Molo*, the characters hardly have families to which they can go back as most of them are killed during the tribal clashes. This is especially the case with Bone and Bafu. Rock's mother, as a result of lacking means of fulfilling the basics of clothing, shelter, and food as well as the right to education for Rock, becomes a prostitute and later dies of HIV/Aids. She exercises her free will to choose to get involved in prostitution whose ultimate price is death. Denied of basic means of survival, she worsens her case by further exploiting her body and depriving herself of dignity and moral uprightness. Her death ultimately denies her the right to life and enjoyment of all rights, and further denies Rock a right to a mother.

Social alienation is further evident in the characters' inability to forge romantic relationships that could lead to marriage. The Slaughterhouse five are so conscious of their social class that they do not allow for meaningful relationships across the social classes. Bomu, while referring to Nancy, warns his friend Bone to 'beware of these rich girls' (Kombani 2004, p. 45). Stella, Bone's ghetto girlfriend, paints a mental picture that highlights the bad effect of class distinction on social relationships. She contrasts the social status of the rich residing Muthaiga, Runda and Lavington with that of Gando slum dwellers, showing that the two are worlds apart. While the former play prestigious sport like golf, drive expensive cars like Mercedes and BMW and have their dinner at classy hotels like Hilton, the latter make a living by selling cheap illegal brew, chang'aa, share a one-roomed house for a family of six and eat the same meal, ugali and terere every day, seven days a week. Stella challenges her boyfriend Bone to realise that he cannot marry his newly found rich girlfriend, Nancy, due to the social gap between them. The class system underscores the rights denied the low class: the right to a home, to privacy, and to food. The narrator's exposition of class system implies a need to get rid of it and ensure that the low class can fulfil these rights. It elicits feelings of hate for the system which allows some to be very rich while others remain very poor. The narrator elicits sympathy for the poor; sympathy is unavoidable when Bone refers to the struggles in the ghetto which have prevented him and Stella from getting married.

Maina and Meja are equally denied the right to have a family. They let go off their girlfriends as is evident in Maina's case when he discontinues his relationship with his girlfriend, Delilah because he cannot afford to sustain a family with her:

He understood...she [Delilah] wanted a husband, a home, children and happiness and security [but] apart from love Maina had nothing else to offer...Children need to be brought up by a father who would keep them satisfied seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day...He himself did not eat seven days a week, even one meal a day...He would have to leave Delilah for her own sake. (Mwangi 1973, p. 88)

The lack of money thus denies Maina and Meja the opportunity to establish their own households and when Maina asks Meja, 'Do you think we shall ever grow old and have wives and children of our own?', we accept as answer to this question Crummey's observation that Maina and Meja do not grow; they 'fail... to make transition from adolescence to manhood' (Crummey 1986, p. 98). This cul-de-sac in their journey of growth and development, the failure to transit into adulthood, speaks of their unfulfilled right to marriage as grown-up members of the society.

Evidently the displaced characters are left rootless and 'unattached': they cut links with their rural homes and the city rejects them. Kimani, Lihanda, Irungu, Kibet and Kiprop are psychologically traumatised by their experiences during the ethnic violence. This is evident in their use of only nicknames in their reference to each other. Nicknames are a strategy to ensure disconnect of these characters with their past. They live in the present and completely avoid any reference to their past. The narrator notes: 'they never talked about their experiences in Molo. They shut their minds to that part of their life completely. Now they lived only for the present' (Kombani 2004, p. 119). It is an unpleasant and humiliating past that these characters choose to mute; they are denied the peace and pride in keeping their names which tie them to their places of origin. That they deny their own histories, their past, is a sign that they have been robbed of their identity, an identity that constitutes who they are essentially as each human being has a history and place of origin.

Unemployed and faced with need to provide for basic needs, the materially deprived characters slip into a life of crime. The denial of their rights leads to violation of other people's right to property. The narrator traces Maina's and Meja's gradual slip into crime: they go to the city expecting paid employment and get none; they resign themselves to living in the back streets where Boi recruits them to work in the white man's farm. At the farm there is rivalry between Boi and them the result of which is that the white man dismisses them from employment and transports them back to the streets. The journey back to the back street signals their retrogression as once there, they are prone to human rights abuse; the white man's employment, bad as it was, is a step towards fulfilling their basic needs. It is while they are back in the streets that a supermarket attendant suspects Maina of stealing jewels from the supermarket. The attendant, a policeman and a crowd of people run after Maina and Meja who leave the back streets and for the first time get into the Main streets. A car runs over Meja and he stays in the hospital for three months. During this time, Maina meets Razor, a gang leader, who introduces him to gang life. The narrative voice thus persuades us to accept the simple explanation that since circumstances have driven Maina from the back streets where he had been keeping law, it is obvious that he will get into crime. Razor justifies crime by arguing that Maina should either work or belong to gang if he is to find food and shelter. Razor says, 'you don't work, you don't belong to any gang...What do you do?...What do you eat? Where do you live?' (Mwangi 1973, p. 56) Razor is suggesting that crime can substitute paid employment in as far as meeting basic needs to food and shelter is concerned.

Razor's argument appeals to Maina, who despite his initial resistance, joins Razor's gang. The story portrays Meja's journey to crime as inevitable too: a failed family reunion leads him back to the city where he works at a quarry but soon the rock is hewn and there is no more work. This situation sends him back to the city streets where he starts off as an inexperienced criminal and gradually learns to be fearless in cheating, mugging, stealing and robbing.

Homeless, unemployed and without money Maina and Meja need to somehow meet their basic needs especially food and shelter, and it happens that they do so in illegal ways. As Ayo Kehinde (2004) observes, given the torturous experiences of these young people, it is no surprise that very soon they have recourse to criminal acts.

The narrative voice portrays crime as understandable as we see in the lengthy description of prisoners and their crime as Maina introduces them to Meja the first time the latter goes to prison. Maina mentions their names and each proudly proclaims the crime that put him in jail and the process is accompanied with laughter. The more grievous the crime the more excitement it attracts among the inmates as it happens when one of them says that he is in prison for the ninth time for robbery with violence. Meja Mwangi's portrayal of crime as understandable through the narrative voice and the characters' observation however has a moral implication. The characters lack means of fulfilling their rights to food, shelter and clothing and they react to this lack by denying other people their right to property when they steal or rob or their right to life when they kill as it happens when Maina kills the couple. This kind of reaction is an eye-for-an-eye mentality which constitutes a primitive consciousness of human rights as if a wrong rights another wrong. The view of crime as a solution to a situation of lack also fails to acknowledge that a human being is essentially a decision maker and therefore the characters have a choice to be or not to be criminals. Since to be fully human entails acceptance and respect for social laws, characters that turn to crime are less human in their behaviour.

Kombani similarly has his characters involved in illegal acts: he names one of the characters 'Ngeta' which is Sheng for 'mug'. This character earns his living by this very criminal act. Ngeta, however, mugs people in an almost friendly way sometimes returning victims' valuable documents and other times letting those who identify him go:

Ngeta never attacked people he knew. Actually, if you passed near his hideout and whispered into the darkness, 'Niaje Ngeta?' ('How are you Ngeta?') nothing would happen to you. Sometimes he returned things he had taken and which he thought would be useful, like people's ID cards. (Kombani 2004, p. 25)

The narrative voice is here suggesting that Ngeta is essentially a good person, so the reader, like the narrator, understands and sympathises with Ngeta. I must however assert as I did in Meja's and Maina's cases that mugging people is an abuse of their right to their property and is not justifiable even in circumstances where one's rights are violated. Other characters who do not harm people directly engage in activities that are self-depriving: Bomu smokes bang, and the five call their one-roomed house 'The Slaughterhouse', a name that suggests that heinous activities are carried out in the house. They are idle, and the consequence of this is that they engage in illegal and immoral behaviour: 'That was when the sex orgies, the binges and the fights started becoming a regular feature of the Slaughterhouse' (p. 119). The story implies that these characters infringe on other people's rights and further degrade themselves because the environment of their displacement favours this moral disposition.

The characters having taken the life of crime, the next logical step in punishment; they suffer police violence and imprisonment. Maina steals milk delivered at the doorstep of customers and sells it to his own customers so as to get money to feed himself and his colleagues in the Razors's gang. Two detective inspectors beat Maina up before handcuffing and hauling him into a patrol car when they catch him stealing the milk. Police officers arrest Meja for robbery and they only stop beating him when he is 'one big ache' (Mwangi 1973, p.145). They question him about the robbery and they beat him more to force a confession out of him. The beatings constitute physical violence which violates Maina's and Meja's bodies by inflicting pain. The police do so contrary to the provision that everyone charged with an offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty in a court of law.

The society curtails the freedom of movement of Maina, Meja and their colleagues in cell number nine to protect its rights to property and life from criminal who threaten its enjoyment of these rights. Indeed the criminals in prison get satisfaction and enjoyment from violating these rights. Moreover, they enjoy their prison terms as is evident in Maina's case; when Meja goes to prison, Maina has four months remaining before he is released but he consoles his friend: 'I will leave you here. But don't worry. I will also find you here when I come back' (Mwangi 1973, p. 147). The in-and-out of prison habits are so predictable that the chief warder and the inmates book sleeping positions of these regular inmates of cell nine. Towards the end of the novel Meja tells the chief warder that a man is free to live where he likes when likes and in his case he is free in cell number nine. Ngugi, one of the prisoners, expresses sentiments that probably explain the criminals' unexpected 'love' for prison: prison meets their basic needs. He says, 'here we eat and sleep and get counted and locked up in cells. Smooth life. Better than most hotels in town. There is no charge for it whatsoever' (p. 140). The inadequate and poor living conditions outside prison cause the criminals to value and treat as urgent their rights to food and accommodation as is suggested by 'we eat and sleep', and to trivialise and relegate to a secondary position their freedom of movement. I further agree with Crummey's suggestion that the protagonists find their greatest stability in recurrent terms in prison because it is similar to the secondary school, which makes their last point of incorporation into an ordered social existence (Crummey 1986).

Displacement further exposes characters to death. Sweeper, a member of Razor's gang, kills a fellow gangster while enforcing discipline in the gang; he is hanged for it. Likewise, Maina's prison colleagues express fear that given his repeated involvement in crime, chances that he will be hanged for killing the couple are high. The narrative voice gives us a description of Maina just before he kills the couple: he is 'cold and hungry and broken...He [wants] food, a fire and a place to sleep' (Mwangi 1973, p. 159). Failure to fulfil these needs threatens Maina's life; so motivated by the will to live and the necessity to fight to stay alive, he kills. This way, Maina's behaviour is understandable as a means of self-preservation. The newspapers call Maina a murderer but Chege and Meja defend Maina saying that Maina was not a murderer and it was not in his character to wish to hurt anyone. I am thus persuaded to examine Maina's behaviour as an act of self-preservation. Maina is alienated not only from his family but also from the entire society. By murdering the couple he breaks the law of his society and society reacts by alienating him from humanity through imprisonment and the likely death sentence. The death sentence like in the case of Sweeper and Maina is retributive justice, an eye-for-an-eye understanding of punishment that perpetuates revenge instead of reconciliation and societal re-integration. It is opposed to restorative justice which gives an offender an opportunity to learn and re-join the society. It is not disputable that Sweeper and Maina have violated a basic human right by killing others but their deaths do not give Maina and Sweeper the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and reform.

In *The Last Villains of Molo* the characters that escaped from Molo to find safety in Nairobi are not safe after all. Revenge follows them after ten years of escape from Molo. The theme of revenge organically connects the five protagonists of the story to the antagonists. The latter consist of Nancy, her uncle, Superintendent Rotich, and her uncle's recruit, Chebet. During the Molo clashes, Bone (Kimani) killed Nancy's father to stop the latter from killing Lihanda (Ngeta) and Nancy's family seeks revenge. Nancy thus befriends Bone and showers gifts not only to him but also to his colleagues so that she can ultimately kill him. Rotich recruits Angelina for her hatred for Kikuyus so that she can execute the killing as part of revenge against this ethnic group. Thus despite running away from the ethnic conflicts in Molo, Bone, Bafu, Bomu, Ngeta and Rock still encounter effects of tribalism.

The first victim of revenge is Bomu who is killed in a mob-violence incident. Angelina, Bomu's distant aunt who is out to avenge Bomu's betrayal of the Kalenjin ethnic group by associating with Kimani and Irungu, shouts "Mwizi! Help! Help! Thief!" (Kombani 2004, p. 129) and the crowd react by meting out mob justice without investigating the claims of the voice accusing Bomu of theft. The action by the crowd is illegal and a violation of Bomu's right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty in a court of law. In addition, the mob deny him the right to life. Next Rotich organises for the killing of Bafu and Ngeta but the latter escapes. A heavily armed contingent of police pick Bafu up and after half an hour people hear gunshots and then Bafu is found dead among two other men. The police boss covers up this murder by displaying guns to convince the public that the three slain men, including Bafu, were gangsters. Bomu and Bafu are denied their right to life.

Affirmation of Human Rights

The two novels, *Kill Me Quick* and *The Last Villains of Molo*, portray similar violations of human rights but differ in their affirmation of the same. In *Kill Me Quick*, the narrator tells a story in which the characters of focus, Maina and Meja, have no way out of their suffering; their rights are on a downward spiral with unemployment and poor working conditions leading to inhuman living conditions which further lead to crime. Criminal activities lead to prison life, and for Maina, the possibility of death by hanging. It is a pessimistic story in which the narrator not only recounts human rights abuses but also glorifies these abuses as in the case of description of Maina and Meja eating dirt, scavenging like and with animals, and enjoying criminal and prison life. Mwangi leaves us with no hope that Maina and Meja's lives could improve in anyway. In fact, the story fails to persuade us to sympathise with Maina and Meja; it invites us to see photographs of them on the street, and stop at that. I agree with Kurtz (1998) and Udenta (1993) that unlike the socialist realist who believes in the inevitability of change, Mwangi is a naturalist who depicts his society in the way it is without suggesting how to change the situation.

Kill Me Quick stops at showing how characters' rights to food, shelter, clothing, employment and decent standard of living are unfulfilled; it fails to show how to remedy this situation of abuse as is the case of a realist novel. It is in this way absurdist presenting pessimistic characters who are passive victims of their circumstances. *The Last Villains of Molo* however introduces us to characters who are optimistic and active participants in their environment of displacement. The story begins with by a quotation, in the dedication part of the novel, from David Mulwa's *Redemption*: 'The young refuse the bonds of the past/ the bonds of hate.' The referents, the young, in this quotation are actively involved in the action of refusing to be enslaved by hatred. They are unlike the persona in the introductory poem in *Kill Me Quick* who is resigned to fate which could lead to death. We therefore expect from the onset that the characters in the novel would fight their problems and challenges.

Nancy's consciousness of the concept of a shared humanity makes her backtrack on her commitment to kill Kimani to avenge her father's death. Each time her uncle hatches a plan to kill one of the Slaughterhouse five, Nancy's guilty conscience speaks loudly. When the mob lynch Bomu to death, Nancy calls the uncle to find out if he had to execute the killing in such a cruel manner and to express doubt if he had to do it at all. Likewise when the police kill Bafu, she categorically states that she does not like what is happening and that she does not want to revenge anymore. Nancy's remorse leads to the ultimate reconciliation between her and Kimani. Her uncle has been giving her drugs to numb her feeling and silence her conscience but Nancy lacks the courage to shoot Bone. She instead shares a human feeling that both are victims of the ethnic clashes and they should team up to fight the evil that the uncles have perpetuated by seeking revenge.

This reconciliation makes us understand why Kombani (2004) quotes Gerry Lourghran at the beginning of chapter one: ‘there are no villains or heroes here, just victims’ (p. 3). The quotation, from which the writer draws the title of the novel, calls for a collective responsibility as opposed to blame in relation to matters of the ethnic violence. It indicates that everybody’s human rights have been violated as a result of ethnic conflicts; none is to blame entirely for violation, and none is the sole victim of the conflict.

The resolution by Kimani and Nancy’s to reconcile counters Rotich’s continued attempts at revenging. They tape him as he makes a confession and threaten to expose him should he ever attempt to carry on with the killings again; they say they will send copies of this confession to the police headquarters, the Kenya Human Rights Commission, all media houses in the country and to the office of the president. At this point Nancy is a human being seeking the company and comfort of Kimani another human being, not a Kalenjin perpetuating negative ethnicity. She admits that her family had nurtured in her the desire to kill; she confesses having no reason for it as she loves Kimani. The reconciliation and friendship between Nancy and Kimani therefore, act as a deterrent to further violation of human rights.

Lastly, the return to Molo after ten years marks the returnees’ determination to show the power of reconciliation. Kimani, Nancy and Irungu build a house whose occupants of the house are Kimani (Kikuyu), Nancy (Kalenjin), Lihanda (Luhyia), Irungu (Kikuyu) and Akinyi, a Luo girl who is orphaned as a result of Likoni ethnic clashes. Bafu, before his death, assists Akinyi to pay her school fees but upon Bafu’s death, she becomes an adopted child of Nancy and Bone. This group of returnees to Molo is representative of different ethnic groups and their habitation of the house is indicative of the writer’s vision for a nation free from tribalism. The building of the house at the end of story suggests a new beginning, a new nation born after the conscious rejection of violations of human rights stemming from tribalism. Supportive elders help this group of returnees to rebuild their lives. The overall atmosphere is one of peace and tranquillity, and the narrator remarks that seeing people happy in these Molo fields, one would not have believed that the same fields were a battlefield ten years before then. This way the narrator affirms and celebrates the events and characters that have conquered ethnic conflict and emerged victorious in the quest for the value of humanity. While the journey from Molo had put the characters on the path of abuse of human rights, the journey to Molo is a journey of restoration of their rights as citizens to own a piece of land and a home.

¹ See Coundouriotis and Goodlad (2010), Joseph Slaughter (2007), Lynn Hunt (2007), James Dawes (2007), and Kerry Bystrom (2008).

² Education loss was added in Cernea's 2002 revision of the impoverishment risks in displacement.

³ Once these characters move to Nairobi they adopt and are known only by nicknames: Kimani, Irungu, Kibet, Kiprop and Lihanda become Bone, Rock, Bomu, Bafu and Ngeta respectively.

References

Cernea, M. M. (1997). Impoverishment Risks, Risk Management, and Reconstruction: A Model of Population Displacement and Resettlement. A paper presented to the UN Symposium on Hydropower and Sustainable Development in support of, and as background to, the Keynote Paper presented by the same author in the set of sessions of the Symposium devoted to the Social Aspects of Hydropower Development. (Beijing , October 27-290)

Chanda, A. (1998). Human rights Training Methods. In J. T. Namisb & B. F. Bankie (Eds.), *The South African Human Rights Reader: Towards a Sustainable Culture of Human Rights*. Windhoek: UNESCO & University of Namibia.

Coundouriotis, Eleni and Goodlad, Lauren. (2010). An Introduction to Comparative Human Rights: Literature, Art, Politics. *Journal of Human Rights*, 9:121- 126.

Crummey, D. (Ed) (1986). *Banditry, Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa*. London: Heinemann. Print.

Davis, B. (2015). Literature, Humanitarianism, and the University. Retrieved June 7, 2016 from www.linkedin.com/today/posts/1bendavis

Dawes, James. (2009). Human Rights in Literary Studies. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 31 (2), 394-409.

Greabner, W. (1992). Sukuma Wiki: Food and Drink in the Nairobi Novels of Meja Mwangi. *Sokomoko Popular Culture in East Africa*. New York: Editions Rodopi.

Hunt, L. (2007). *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.