

RAPE AND THE FEMALE IDENTITY IN YEJIDE KILANKO'S *DAUGHTERS WHO WALK THIS PATH*

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Abstract

Historically, the Nigerian female gender has suffered unspoken denigrations in different intensities. Thus the female identity in Africa is that which has been relegated to the background. Women in African society have been associated with qualities like weakness, emotion and dependence. In *Daughters who walk this Path*, the novelist explores the predicaments of the female character as a result of rape. A systematic and critical approach adopted in this study unraveled the different causes, forms and consequences of rape and violation of female character in literary works. The theoretical framework of the paper is based on the African feminist theory and Trauma theory. The objective of this paper is to critically examine the traumatic effects of rape on the female victim. The paper establishes that the female folks have suffered abuse and violation from the male folk in African society and that some men derive pleasure in sexually abusing women. Factors such as; family background, poverty, and quest for survival expose these women to rape and violation because men take advantage of them in such a helpless situation. The researcher did a critical analysis of the source texts.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Rape, Trauma, African Feminism.

Introduction

Rape is defined as physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration (even if slight) of the vulva or anus, using a penis, other body parts or an object. The attempt to do so is known as attempted rape. Rape of a person by two or more perpetrators is known as gang rape. Sexual violence can include other forms of assault involving a sexual organ, including coerced contact between the mouth and penis, vulva or anus. Matlin (2004) defines rape thus: Rape is sexual penetration without the individual's consent- obtained by force or by threat of physical harm, or when the victim is incapable of giving consent... a broader term, sexual assault, includes sexual touching and other forms of unwanted sexual contact, which may be accompanied by psychological pressure and coercion or by physical threats.

In the society, women are consistently bruised and brutalized. These are mostly imposed on them by their male counterparts. Women are regarded as the weaker vessels and also as sex objects and political pawns in the games played by men. To showcase their commitment to the feminist cause, many writers/activists use their works as platforms to critique patriarchal and sexist values in society that propagate issues such as "... female subjugation, psychological brutality, individual inferiorisation and exclusion on gender lines" (Uko, 2006, p. 82).

The novel, *Daughters Who Walk this Path* signals a new phase in African women's writing and a fresh response to the menace of sexual victimization in African society. Of recent, traditional and social media (in Nigeria in particular) have drawn much public attention to troubling issues that affect the lives of women and girls such as forced and child-marriage, domestic violence and sexual abuse and the kidnapping of girls by militants. Kilanko's novel is a projection of rape (child sexual abuse in particular), a subject often hushed in the African society for fear of stigmatization. In his exploration of the work, Adebola highlights the patriarchal world of the novel as one which reflects the: "intricacies of the feminine existence, the pains induced by men and the limitations or rules set by the patriarchal society ... (which sets the tone for the) socio-cultural ordeals and emotional traumas encountered by the female characters" ("Within the Feminine Wall") (19).

African Feminism and Trauma Theories as Theoretical Tools

African feminism critically interrogates gender discrimination from the African perspective with a view to elevating the roles of African women who are seen traditionally as the carriers of societal encumbrances and whose roles must be made complementary to the roles of the men. Feminism in the African context, according to Ogunjide-Leslie (2007), “is not calling for a reversal of gender roles, and it is not a call for a particular sexual orientation; neither is it in opposition to men and African culture.”(7). African feminism recognizes the existence of other forms of feminism such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, cultural feminism and Islamic feminism. African feminism, according to Ogunjide-Leslie, is “a kind of red flag to the bull of African men.”(8).

African feminism, therefore, calls for the overhauling and amelioration of the conditions of women in which women will be economically, politically and socially empowered to enable them to be involved in the societal transformation without compromising their motherhood and recognizing their biological and reproductive rights. Although this view is also shared by other forms of feminism, African feminism lays more emphasis on the complementary roles of both genders in enhancing societal growth and development in addition to the welfare of women. That is the concern of Olomjobi when he says that African feminism is concerned with African nuances without disparaging them in view of the various socio-economic classes and socio-cultural backgrounds that define the identities of the African women. He says that:

African feminism rests on the notion that women in Africa are socially constructed by different cultural components. . . . The theory attempts to shift away from misleading notions of equating western values with non-western societies. The point to bear in mind is that African women have different identities and primordial attachment to region and cultural determinants than women from western societies (11).

Trauma theory is an active, interdisciplinary western field of study which has been developed since the 1980s through the mutual exchange of ideas and concepts in the humanities and psychology. The incorporation of trauma theory into exploring literary studies is realized in relation to the influence of psychoanalysis; it has also helped in explaining or exploring the complexities of the relationships during violence or violent acts. Hence, sexual assault and rape which are violent acts fit into this category.

The term, “trauma theory” was first documented and explained in Caruth’s (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The theory originates from the exposition and explanation of Sigmund Freud on traumatic experiences in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Moses and Monotheism*. In essence, Freud’s concept of “traumatic neurosis,” is what the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 accepted as “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD), an idea important in defining the trauma theory. Caruth (1995) defines “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD) as a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event...The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly...To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event”.

Rape and Psychological Trauma in Kilanko’s *Daughters Who Walk This Path*

In *Daughters who Walk this Path*, Yejide Kilanko presents an incidence of sexual aggression by a violent male figure, which results in severe negative consequences in a fragile girl of fifteen. The invisible truth of unforgettable experience overshadows her being. The disclosure leads to varied reactions from the public--ranging from surprise, pity, disappointment to supportive and compassionate care. However, by inculcating hope within the traumatized individual, profound marks embedded in the psyche of the victim are deciphered, but the violent experience remains alive until the time of the victim's burial. This study promotes the possibility for alteration in cultural and socio-political ideologies, which sustain trauma and the perpetrators of trauma.

In *Daughters who Walk this Path*, the novelist x-rayed child rape and rape by an acquaintance. Child rape is a type of sexual assault in which an adult abuses a child through forced penetration for sexual stimulation, while acquaintance rape is that which is perpetrated by a member of the family. In Morayo’s case, her first cousin, Tayo, whom she and her sister fondly call “Bros T”, is the assailant. Tayo becomes

a member of the household when his widowed mother (Morayo's maternal aunt), requests that he lives with them to enable him benefit from the influence of a father-figure in his life while preparing for his tertiary education.

Tayo's mother is a well-to-do business woman, who acknowledges he is a "half-man, half-boy who needs the firm hands of a man" (37-38). Auntie Tope (Tayo's mother) takes this decision having been conditioned by the sexist assumption that a single woman cannot "mould" a son single handedly. Tayo is, therefore, welcomed into the Ajayi household, accorded the full status and privileges of a son, and allotted the stereotypical roles that go with them. The self-centred and insensitive Tayo steals and lies, having become sexually aware, is once caught spying on an adult female member of the household, Auntie Adunni, while she takes her bath; he is also expelled from boarding school for trying to force his way into the room of a female student he fancies. Tayo, unknown to his guardians, becomes involved with a peer group that indulges in wild drinking sprees and girls, some of whom he invites home in their absence.

Tayo's attitude towards Morayo, her younger sister, Eniayo, and the girls he dates is clearly influenced by the sense of power and domination he has over them. What eventually push him over the edge, however, are his love for alcohol, peer pressure and the desire for sexual gratification. Obviously, traditional notions of gendered sexuality are largely responsible for power relations between the sexes which reinforce peer pressure and the desire to be sexually active. When Morayo is ill and left in his care while the rest of the family travel for a day, Tayo seizes the opportunity to invite and entertain his friends at home and, under the haze of alcohol, he is goaded into crossing the final line. At first, Morayo assumes she is being attacked by robbers when she wakes with "a large coarse hand across her mouth" (*Daughters who Walk this Path*, 72).

On realizing her assailant is none other than Tayo, she fights back, but is threatened with bodily harm and gang rape should she resist. She recounts:

My legs were thrown apart. I felt a sharp pain go right through my centre. As Bros T pushed into my unwelcoming body, my spirit floated up to the ceiling. Looking down, I saw a child with a familiar face on the bed below. Her terror-filled eyes stared away into nothingness, her mouth open wide in a silent scream. Then as quickly as I had left that trembling body, I was back inside. I felt a pain deep, deep inside me (*Daughters who Walk this Path*, 73).

Morayo's traumatic experience can be summed up by Matlin's observation that, although the reactions of victims are many and diverse depending on the nature of the attack they are subjected to, "almost all the female victims who have been raped report that they were terrified, repulsed, confused, overwhelmed, and anxious during the time they were being raped... (And) some also feel detachment from their own body.

The effect of rape can be devastating on the victim and leave a long time memory. It can have an adverse effect on the health and development of a female girl because the after effects, physical and psychological, can last for ages. Apart from the immediate effects, long term consequences, among them post-traumatic stress disorder, "a debilitating psychological syndrome that involves detailed reliving of the traumatic event, panic attacks, depression, nightmares and sleep disorders" (Bates et al. 358-359) may also manifest, as does happen in the cases of Morayo and Morenike. Morayo's life undergoes a drastic change after her abuse because her parents shy away from acknowledging, listening to and counseling her about her traumatic experience.

Traumatic Effects of Rape on the Female Character

Suicidal feelings and panic attacks are part of the effects of rape on the female character. Bros T's constant rape and abuse on Morayo was a life threatening event. He used to call her even in his own bedroom to assault her. His presence in the home is a constant source of threat to her. Bros T is exploiting her by repeatedly abusing her. He knows her weak point, that she will let herself be exploited in love of her younger sister. Judith Herman says that repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. She continues, the child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable

tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness. Unable to care for or protect herself, she must compensate for the failures of adult care and protection with the only means at her disposal, an immature system of psychological defences (1992, 96).

The additional trauma of their oppression pushes her to attempt suicide by taking an overdose of painkillers but for the timely arrival of Morenike who saves the situation. Morayo recounts:

Seeing the medicine bottle on the table, I suddenly wondered what it would feel like to empty the entire bottle into my mouth. As soon as the thought came, my body became rigid ... When I stayed awake in my room at night, I wondered what it would feel like not to be trapped in this heavy body but floating around free ... Tilting my head back, I emptied half the bottle of Panadol Extra into my mouth. (*Daughters who Walk this Path*, 83)

Due to intense stress, she has started having migraines which the mother thinks that a tablet of pain-killer will cure her. Failing to get attention of mother, she decides to kill herself by taking a bottle full of medicine. She thinks that death will free her from the traumatic pain which she is undergoing for such a long time. She feels as if her soul is trapped inside heavy body so she wishes to feel free. The experimental studies on child sex abuse of Van der Kolk (1991) “demonstrate that histories of childhood physical and sexual abuse, as well as parental neglect and separations are strongly correlated with a variety of self-destructive behaviour in adulthood, including suicide attempts and cutting” (1669).

Morenike's empathy, acknowledgement of the situation and comfort serve as a positive outlet for Morayo's pain and turbulent emotions and the level of the post-traumatic stress disorder she suffers is revealed years later when Tayo (now resident abroad) suddenly returns home for the burial of their grandmother. On seeing him, Morayo suffers a severe panic attack - clammy hands, buzzing ears, racing heart, and numbing cold and, despite his plea for forgiveness, she flees, falls and ends up unconscious and hospitalized for days. Morenike, on the other hand, appears not to have been as deeply scarred as Morayo on the surface, but this proves to be untrue. She is so unhappy with her life that she feels as if time has become too slow. Normally people say that time flies but for Morayo time “dragged on painfully” (82). Day by day the burden is getting heavier than before. She has become “tired of the silent screams in her head” (*Daughters who Walk this Path*, 82).

A perceptive Morayo describes her cousin thus: “Morenike often had a faraway look in her eyes as if her mind was elsewhere while her body sat still ...” (*Daughters Who Walk This Path*, 56). Stigmatized by her victimization, Morenike assumes a no-nonsense and prickly demeanor often accompanied by mood swings. In her case, the observation of Bates et al. that victims may become “unmarriageable members of households and hence, further victimized” (358) proves to be true.

About traumatic memories, Whitehead says:

Traumatic recollection is characterized by the striking paradox that while its re-enactments are disturbingly literal and precise, they nevertheless remain largely unavailable to conscious recall and control. Although the event returns in a vivid and precise form in the traumatic nightmare or flashback, it is simultaneously accompanied by amnesia. (140)

On the same night, on the dining table she discloses the secret to her parents which was not less than an explosion for them. The father's blood pressure shoots up so high that his gums start bleeding. Immediately her mother's eyes are filled with tears but she does not come forward to say a word of consolation to the daughter. She does not even look at Morayo and as a result of that she feels that her “anger towards Mummy reignited” (*Daughters who Walk this Path*, 84) because she should have consoled her broken child who is undergoing through terrible pain. Instead of feeling worried about Morayo, she completely ignores her presence. On finding this reaction of mother, she wants to scream and shout to make her realize that the pain she is undergoing is because of her nephew. To her surprise, when her parents return after dropping Bros T to his home, they do not soothe her at all.

The father looks at her with a tired face but to her surprise the mother stares at her with “bloodshot eyes” (89). Then when father walks towards staircase to go into his bedroom, the mother's looks at Morayo with red eyes filled with fresh tears. She sighs and leaves the room. At this point, Morayo

wishes to be embraced and kissed. She wishes that her mother may ask questions to her like what happened and how it happened, but not a single word of solace comes out of her mouth. Her heartbeat increases and she feels as if it will break apart but she finds no shoulder where she can put her head to cry.

The mother of Morayo is ignoring her daughter's feelings as if nothing unusual has happened. She should fight on her own out of this traumatic situation which is not possible for such a young girl who has come across trauma which is far more disturbing than if she would have been assaulted by the labourers working in the under-construction building. The mother is avoiding discussing the matter due to which there is a continuous negotiation going on within her with her past. She wants her mother to discuss the issue with her but at the same time she wants to stay alone; she does not want to go to family gatherings.

The anxiety and pain of Morayo does not decrease with the passage of time. On the contrary, as the time passes by, Morayo feels as if "the dark cloud surrounding her grows even bigger" (93). She has to live "a double life" (89). At school, she has to pretend that everything is fine and normal and at home she could not face her parents whose eyes are asking "unasked questions?" (*Daughters who Walk this Path*, 90). She feels that they want to ask her why she has delayed the step of disclosing this secret to her parents, why she let that evil man inflict trauma on her. But they never ask their daughter any such question directly.

The pain increases in intensity as she finds her younger sister is being sent to boarding school because after Morayo's experience the parents feel that living in boarding school will teach her independence and she will learn to take care of herself. The separation from her sister is very painful. To express her feelings for her sister, she says that she is not crying but it is "raining inside her eyes" (92). After the departure of her sister and aunt Adunni who has stayed with them for ten years, her feeling of loneliness intensified because parents have not talked or asked a single question about Bros T from her. The experience of pain caused by Bros T is not yet over, as she feels a "cold knot deep inside (her) that had come after that first night with Bros T pulled tight until (she) could barely breath from the pain" (95).

Depression and desire for revenge is another traumatic effect of rape. On shifting to the university hostel for higher studies, Morayo starts torturing herself by developing reckless attitude as she goes from one man to another. Sometimes she used to take it as a challenge and entice them to such an extent that they submit to her offers. She has been doing it out of anger which she has developed for the male gender after the inhuman treatment of Bros T. The pain of trauma is still there, though much time has elapsed. She is now in a new city, in a new environment, among new people but she cannot erase that painful experience from her mind which she has undergone when Bros T came first time to her bedroom to ravish her.

People have started raising fingers on her. Her friends, mother and sister stop her from doing so but she is not ready to listen to anyone. It is like as if she is punishing herself by adopting such a reckless attitude. One night even the guard of the university hostel degrades and insults her by considering her worse than a prostitute. She has stigmatized her identity out of sheer frustration. His painful remarks touched her for the first time which makes her cry bitterly. For two days, she remains in her bed without eating, bathing or going to the campus to attend lectures. Suddenly she feels that she is the same little girl who tried to take pills to kill her. Herman (1992) says that it is misconception that growing up will resolve the trauma. She elucidates,

The emotional state of the chronically abused child ranges from a baseline of unease, through intermediate states of anxiety and dysphoria, to extremes of panic, fury, and despair. Not surprisingly, a great many survivors develop chronic anxiety and depression which persist into adult life. The extensive recourse to dissociative defenses may end up aggravating the abused child's dysphonic emotional state, from dissociative process sometimes goes too far. Instead of producing a protective feeling of detachment, it may lead to a sense of complete disconnection from others and disintegration of the self (108).

One of the psychological disorders suffered by victims of sexual assault especially rape is loss of identity or self image. Morayo feels so overwhelmed by these traumatic feelings that when she meets her first love, Kachi, she does not want to continue her relationship with him. She is in such a mental state that her voice chocked when she meets him. She wants to tell him all about her past but at the same time she is afraid of losing a good man. She is unable to decide what to do. She refuses to carry on any relationship with any man after being betrayed by Bros T. All her friends are getting married but whenever her mother asks her to find a suitable life partner for herself she feels her heart heavy and wants to run far away. Much time has passed but the feel of disgust is there. When she looks at her image in the mirror, she does not want to look at herself. She goes to her bed to lie there in “fetal position”, which shows her intense sense of insecurity from which she is suffering.

Fifteen years have passed, now both of them are settled in their professional and private lives, still she feels terrified as a small child. The protagonist describes her feelings, “As soon as I stepped into the sitting room and saw him, I felt as if i was submerged in water and my lungs deprived of oxygen” (*Daughters Who Walk This Path*, 292). Her condition is like that of a person drowning in deep waters where she can find no oxygen. She has been through this state of mind for almost two decades while the perpetrator is passing a very normal and luxurious life with no burden on his heart. Morayo is working as a professional banker. She has a potential to grow in her career but Bros T approaches her as client and forces the boss of Morayo that the officer in charge of his work should be Morayo. He forces the boss to bring Morayo to his house and then makes him leave his house to stay alone in the company of Morayo. On finding herself in the presence of the perpetrator, she gets terrified to such an extent that she runs away from the room and slips from the stairs. Though she slips from stairs but fortunately the life of their unborn child is saved. The last message which she receives from aunt Morenike who has died in late thirties due to cancer, “My dear, please remember to be kind to yourself” (327). She suggests Morayo to forget the past and look ahead into the bright future which is waiting for her.

Although she excels academically and achieves her professional goals, she is unable to commit to marriage and remains a single parent until her death. Morayo's sexual victimization and trauma, however, come at a high cost. At the university, she develops behavioural problems and finds solace in alcohol, cigarettes and sexual promiscuity as a salve to her diminished self-worth and confidence. This persists until she completes her education, reconnects with her childhood love, Kachi, and marries him. In her marital relationship, Morayo struggles with intimacy and trust issues, before finding herself on the path of healing.

Conclusion

The paper vividly shows that rape is a major form of sexual victimization in the African society. The unequal power relation in the patriarchal African society promotes male dominance and invariably, affects gender relations in the various institutions in society. The female characters' inability to survive and/or challenge abuse is frequently suggested to be an effect of cultural norms which presume that women who behave and dress appropriately will not be subjected to rape and violation. . One of the common rape myths is seeing women as being in the “wrong” place, dressing inappropriately, or indulging in provocative behaviour. However, female characters in the text were usually raped by known men; employers, relatives, husbands or boyfriends. Thus, the male characters who perpetrate this act are not represented by the authors as abnormal individuals who randomly attack women. This implies the belief that rape still exists in the very structures of society as part of men's social and structural power over women.

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