THE UNFORGETTABLE AND INVISIBLE TRUTH: 
A STUDY OF ACQUAINTANCE RAPE IN 
YEJIDE KILANKO’S 
DAUGHTERS WHO WALK THIS PATH 

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Abstract

The outstanding contribution of feminism is that it highlighted the issue of women’s mental health instigated by hidden but common abuse of women and children. Yejide Kilanko has presented 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. The concept of social stigma makes life miserable for the victim who feels sadness and humiliation. 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.

Keywords

Abuse, anxiety, hope, mother, trauma
Introduction

Instances of acquaintance rape are rarely reported due to a sense of shame, fear of aggression from the perpetrator and social consequences. Sometimes the victim feels guilty for the rape and blames herself for the violent act. Many women are unable to reframe what has happened to them, as the incident is rather an unexpected one. They usually carry lifetime pain, which results in social withdrawal. In most cases, the victims fail to realize that it is essential to take both medical and legal advice. The work of Yejide Kilanko’s Daughters Who Walk This Path, selected for this paper, deals with the refrain of acquaintance rape as the novel successively shows the motif in two generations. However, this paper focuses on the character of a traumatized girl who receives the full support of her mother, grandmother and father.

The Story

The story, told by Yejide Kilanko goes like this:

It is back in 1987 when twelve-year old Morenike is going to school in the safe custody of her father’s best friend, Chief Komolafe. Morenike’s mother believes that “children nowadays need freedom to discover themselves” (2012, 119), so sends her child to the boarding school. Both the parents have complete trust in Chief Komolafe who is considered one of the most respectable members of the community. After two weeks of poor health of Morenike, the school authorities were compelled to take her to a doctor in the hospital where the doctor confirms her pregnancy. The mother is called by the principal to take the child back to her home as she is expelled from the school.

It is very traumatic for both the mother and the daughter to accept this painful truth, which suddenly ended the academic career of the child who is a prospective candidate for the head-girl of the school. With thousands of muddled thoughts, the mother takes her child back home. The reaction of the father is rather unexpected as he gets highly infuriated and blames the wife for sending the child away from home, an act which has resulted in such severe consequences. He is not ready to accept that his friend is behind this heinous act. He refuses to shelter his daughter and the unborn grandchild.

When Morenike is called by Chief Komolafe into his bedroom to accomplish his evil designs, the girl is so confident about the uncle that “she did not think she was in any danger” (2012, 107) though her mother has warned her not to be alone in the room of any male. When Morenike resisted, he slaps her head back on the head post, turns her unconscious to betray her. The next morning the perpetrator is calm and peaceful. He enjoys his breakfast and newspaper in a casual mood, while the life and thoughts of Morenike have taken a drastic turn. From a studious girl she is turned into a girl who is
staring mindlessly into space. She has become quiet and passive, as she cannot share the horrific secret that she has been raped by no one else but by her father’s friend to whom her parents entrusted their daughter.

On reaching the school, Morenike tries to forget what has happened to her. However, it is hard for her to forget, but she repeatedly tells herself that she has to forget the unwanted incident until a time comes that she starts believing in the falsity of the incident, but her nausea and vomiting hold the secret of a burdensome reality. Morenike’s mother, unlike many mothers decides to expose the rapist, though this will tarnish the life of her daughter. The mother believes that rich people bring calamities to the lives of common people and pass by with no guilt as if they have crushed an insect that has come in their way. Their evil deeds should be exposed to the rest of the community from whom they draw honour and respect.

Holding the arm of her daughter, she rushes to the office of Chief Komolafe and degrades him right in his work place. She exposes the ugly face of the man in front of his wives who work on different levels of a multi-storied building. The daughter, on the other hand, feels embarrassed at becoming a “public spectacle” (2012, 116). Chief Komolafe, instead of feeling ashamed of his act, puts all the blame on Morenike by calling her “wayward” (2012, 117) and accuses the mother also for not teaching modesty to her daughter. Forgetting the friendship that Chief Komolafe has had with her husband, the mother very boldly says, “You are a shameless old man who cannot be trusted around a goat. You will live to regret the day you touched my daughter” (2012, 118).

The mother of Morenike does not remain silent because as Sarah M. Guerette and Sandra L. Caron say,

...Silence only breeds silence. By perpetuating the silence, acquaintance rape becomes a crime of almost no consequence for men. Since admitting that someone has raped them is such an embarrassing topic for most women, they are unlikely to prosecute their rapist. This also means that men often are able to rape multiple women because women are too embarrassed to share their experiences, warn other women, and perhaps prevent the same man from raping other women. In addition, because of their silence, women miss the opportunity to find support amongst other victims/survivors. (2007, 49)

The support which Morenike gets from her mother is a note of hope, which helps her to move forward with courage to face the world. Later, when she gains weight, she has to face many pointed fingers of many mothers warning their teenage daughters, but with the support of her mother and the love of her grandfather, she moves on. It is essential to inculcate hope within trauma victims. The mother reassures the girl that she has full
confidence in the character of her girl and knows that it is not her fault. She should not feel guilty about what has happened to her; instead, the mother considers herself responsible for this atrocity. She begs forgiveness from her daughter and thinks that she should not have trusted her husband’s friend to send her daughter along.

The love of her grandmother, who is a smiling woman, reduces the intensity of sadness within Morenike. She misses her school and her brothers during her stay in the village with her grandmother. She wants to enjoy the beauty that nature offers, but the humiliating remarks of village people make her pray for the death of the baby “so that she could be free” (2012, 125). She has been nurturing painful thoughts, which her grandmother discerns. The grandmother consoles her and says that she knows that the child is coming to this world after a painful incident, but she should keep in mind that “good can come from evil. Remember, this child has a part of you too. Start loving that part. Perhaps one day, your love for your child will grow stranger than your hatred for the father” (2012, 125). It is after these encouraging words and loving feelings of her grandmother that Morenike for the first time sings a song for her unborn child.

Morenike’s mother visits her daughter regularly, every time bringing little things for the unborn child. The little gifts, however, fail to excite any feelings of love or excitement in the young mother. The questions of village people add to the intensity of the situation as people ask about the identity of the father. There are many questions asked by the people to which the family has no answer. They do not have anything to discuss or to explain. During the time of birth, she feels as if every fiber of her body is cursing the rapist.

**Theoretical Framework**

Accidental trauma in human life due to some calamity of nature can be disastrous, but trauma having a human origin like barbaric bombing of civilians or hate crime is atrocious. The latter form of trauma breaks fundamental assumptions related to human relationship. This aspect is true for both the soldier who ruthlessly kills the enemy on a battlefield and a child being abused by a family member. The closer the relationship, the more enormous is the psychological damage.

Daughters who grow up in insecure family environments exhibit ambivalent feelings of love and fear towards male members of society. They want to end the abuse by telling someone but are afraid that if they disclose the secret, it will result in ending family ties. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges propose a “strategy for listening” to women’s incest, telling that acknowledges “the experience of incest [ . . . ] as an actuality,” but point to the difficulties of “gaining a sympathetic audience, avoiding retaliation, and finding a way
around the familiar and debasing personae associated with tellers: the liar, the seducer, the hysteric, the victim” (2001, 2).

Freud’s notion of latency or belatedness, which he initially developed in relation to hysteria and seduction theory in the late nineteenth century, implicitly hinted at sexual abuse of girls by familial relationships. From this study, he concluded that hysteria was a sort of mental imbalance, not a pathological disease. In order not to offend the patriarchal structure of society, Freud initially disguised the identity of the abusive fathers in the case studies of Katharina and Rosalia published in the Studies on Hysteria (1895). He attributes the molestation to their uncles. It was not until 1924 that he added footnotes revealing the girls’ fathers as aggressors. The subject of incest remained concealed and buried for many decades, thus delaying serious study and in-depth analysis of this grave issue.

After Following Freud’s study, not only men’s, but women’s symptoms also, began to be included in the domain of post-traumatic stress disorder. Earlier it was believed that women’s traumatic experiences in the domestic sphere were just imaginary or at the most caused by extreme sexual repression. Their ailments were considered not real, as opposed to those of men who had undergone severe accidental shocks or had endured the plight of the trenches amid bullets and blasts for many months. Later, feminists highlighted the fact that the numbers of women who suffer from long-term effects of psychological trauma are greater than of war veterans. Women who were traumatized in their private lives with continuity stood in no comparison to war and accident neurosis.

Judith Herman, in Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence— from domestic abuse to political terror (1992), brings together experiences of trauma caused by domestic and sexual violence, war, and terrorism in her quest for a more inclusive and general approach to trauma. Bessel van der Kolk states that even though research has repeatedly shown that human beings exposed to betrayal, abandonment and abuse by their caretakers suffer from complex psychobiological disturbances, but “our diagnostic system continues to lump together all trauma-related symptomatology under the category of PTSD” (2010, 57). Psychologists highlighted the political implications of broadening the diagnosis of psychological trauma. It would disrupt and question the patriarchal social structures that perpetuate female victimization which are still very strong.

Acquaintance abuse particularly deals with non-experiences and untellable events. These non-events and non-experiences cannot be testified to, as they are un-narratable. Thus, the life of the victim becomes extremely traumatized. As Rothberg suggests, “This attempt at communication, at testimony, is above all else ethical— that is, it should be undertaken, even if the value of its results is far from obvious, and even if what is communicated is the very failure or limit of communication” (emphasis in original) (2000,
162). There is more than just a linguistic challenge at work for the speaker as well as the listener because the crying voice here is the “most delicate” and the “most vulnerable” member of society (Morrison, 1970, 210).

In a patriarchal culture, there is a defined male supremacy while “women are taught not to speak” (Garcés, 2008, 46). This suppression has very severe consequences as silence leads to denial, and, as Doane and Hodges put it, “frees the field for perpetrators” (2001, 14). Instead of the perpetrator going behind bars, he enjoys the respect of society and comforts of home. This not telling propagates and prolongs the oppression. About this kind of sexual abuse Balkan says, that “it arises out of an assumed prerogative, super structured with rationale, protected by traditions of silence, and, even more than in rape, an assurance of the object’s continuing fear, shame, powerlessness and, therefore, silent acquiescence” (1980, 240).

In comparison to war veterans, women, due to patriarchal structures, “are more likely than men to be exposed to trauma that is sustained, repeated, and more damaging in type and severity” (Sanchez-Hucles and Hudgins 2001, 1151-52). The soldiers come back home where they find solace and comfort while women are abused and tortured repeatedly in their own homes. Most often, perpetrators threaten them not to reveal the secret to anyone. Herman mentions, “When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable” (1992, 8). Thus, the individual is caught up in a dilemma of the need to tell the experience and the pressure not to tell, as it will badly expose the acquaintance. This silencing has adverse psychological after-effects of the physical abuse, leading to flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive thoughts. The confrontation with reality becomes extremely demanding; the victim undergoes a painful process of thinking and re-thinking because the site of incomprehensibility resists narrativization.

If the issue of gender is related to the issue of race, the situation becomes remarkably serious. Criticizing political systems with organizational inequalities, many black female intellectuals like Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Ella Baker offer a critical scrutiny of systemic domination that exposes the mechanics of patriarchy to show interrelations of sexism, racism, and classism. However, both women and men are harmed by patriarchy; as bell hooks points out, we should not dismiss the scarring effects that patriarchy has on men in dehumanizing them and in teaching them to be emotionally unavailable. The suffering of the black woman is massive because she is doubly marginalized, based on her difference from the male norm and from the norm of the white woman. The trauma which is interconnected with race is called “insidious trauma:” the trauma that is “associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic
Inculcating Hope—Essential for Recovery

The primary function of attachment relations is to alleviate suffering and regulate distress by reducing alienation, despair and hopelessness. This healing is done by boosting the self-confidence and self-worth of a traumatized person. One has to be courageous to meet the adverse circumstances of life with courage. Keeping the target in mind facilitates the process when accompanied by a positive expectation for the future. Hope is a fluid state of mind as “hope invariably is intertwined with some combination of fear, doubt, despair and a sense of futility—otherwise there would be no need of hope” (Allen 2013, 309). The concept of faith is strongly associated with hope. Some people recover by “feeling connected to God or having confidence in God’s plan” (2013, 310); others associate themselves with nature or the universe which is in a state of flux. These thoughts sprout positivity in them, which helps them to recognize that life offers uncountable possibilities.

The supreme powers of God help people in the process of recovery. Strong bonding with God promotes hope, and it also functions to bring people back to more secure attachments with others in the community. People who have traumatic experiences may encounter spiritual struggles, but the sooner they develop a connection with the Higher Reality, the earlier they come out of their troubled state of mind.

Acquaintance Rape in Yejide Kilanko’s Daughters Who Walk This Path

I attempt to examine how a novel by a Nigerian woman writer poignantly delineates the most sinister form of trauma that which girls experience in their homes. This study proposes that it is necessary to read such trauma narratives with a focus on exploration of psychological impact on the victim, who finds herself far more helpless as she cannot understand the intentions of the relative who is simultaneously a perpetrator. A feminist analysis aids in “explaining how such widespread abuses visited mainly by one sex upon the other could be so long denied or condoned” (Herman 1981, 220).

Yejide Kilanko has exquisitely portrayed how a father’s friend rapes a school-going girl. The parents cannot imagine that such a respectable, rich and senior member of the community endangers the honour of their child. Consequently, not only the victim but also the whole family suffers. The father feels embarrassed; the mother is shocked, while the girl carries the pain until her deathbed. Apparently, she eventually becomes a successful professional and an independent social worker, but the acquaintance rape has made her
over-sensitive. On hearing that her niece has met the same fate, she weeps for a long time until her eyes have no more tears. She survives because of the hope, inculcated within her by her mother and grandmother. Later in life, the father also supports her by admitting her to college and university. Although she carries the pain of the trauma throughout her life, the hope inculcated by her family members helps her to move on with confidence and courage. It remains the most unforgettable and invisible reality of her life.

**Conclusion**

Future research must address the serious issue of acquaintance rape through thoughtful conceptualization to realize the promise of rape prevention. Progress may result in restructuring of policies and legislative reforms. With promotion of such ideologies, public safety officers can more effectively decrease the rate of recurrence of such incidents. It is found that a majority of traumatized women do not seek professional services, which they should be encouraged to do.

**References**


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