

THE RETURN OF NIGHTMARES IN YEJIDE KILANKO'S DAUGHTERS WHO WALK THIS PATH

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ABSTRACT

Post-2000 Nigerian literature in English demonstrates an extraordinary admiration for the child narrator. These narratives are presented from the perspective of a child to truthfully portray sociopolitical issues, and to present situations in which they are victimized by their elders. The victimized child-character symbolically represents vulnerable members of the society who are being exploited by the powerful. This article emphasizes on the fact that furtive problems, no matter how untellable they are, need to be addressed. Symptoms like nightmares, flashbacks, fear, disturbed sleep and anxiety are clear signs of psychological trauma. The protagonist of the selected text has to continuously negotiate with her past. She gives vent to her frustration by torturing her own body and soul. Narration can operate as a catalyst for the recovery of the self. I integrate nightmares, a significant symptom of trauma due to sexual violence with deteriorated mental health. The novel becomes a medium to promote survival and resistance within African society, implicating readers as witnesses to assure change.

Keywords: Mother; Pain; Parents; Past; Trauma.

INTRODUCTION:

Daughters Who Walk This Path (2012) is written by Yejide Kilanko, a Nigerian writer who is currently pursuing her literary career while simultaneously working as a therapist in children’s mental-health center. In an interview “Being a Writer is a Huge Part of My Identity”, she aptly remarks: “There has always been this illusion that we are safest at home, yet as research has shown, we are most vulnerable at home, as was the case with Morayo”. She continues, “Sexual predators often prey on people they have easy access to”, she further elaborates, “our extended family households combined with a culture of secrecy and silence presents a predator with a lot of opportunities”. In the selected work, the writer has chosen exploitation of innocence by a close relative to be the main theme of the novel.

TRAUMA AS A CONSEQUENCE OF INCEST:

Trauma is a natural consequence of incest. The instance of trauma is decidedly individual but one thing that is shared by many victims of trauma is a delicate equilibrium between a desire to speak about what they have experienced and an inability to abridge their suffering into the medium of language.

It is essential to first explore a theoretical framework that would facilitate the examination of Kilanko’s *Daughters Who Walk This Path*. The leading theorists of trauma studies have explored an innovative way of understanding psychological studies by alluding to the works of literature. In context of scientific theories, Freud’s frequent allusions to classical literature like Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, Goethe’s *Faust*, and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* plus *Macbeth* suggest that distinguished psychologists have placed literature in foreground to have an in-depth understanding of their empirical work (Frankland, 2000, 6). Similarly Cathy Caruth while referring to Freud says, “Tancred’s story thus represents traumatic experience not only as the enigma of a human agent’s repeated and unknowing acts but also as the enigma of the otherness of a human voice . . . , a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know” (1996, 2-3). Caruth asserts that, “the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (emphasis in original) (1996, 3), and that all traumas have “the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*” (emphasis in original) (1996, 2). Caruth further elaborates,

What the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud’s writing on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (1996, 4)

METHODOLOGY:

I propose that qualitative research is the most appropriate approach for this study. In discussing the preference of conducting qualitative research, Corbin and Strauss emphasize that the most important reason to conduct qualitative research is the “desire to step beyond the known and enter into the world of participants, to see the world from their perspective and in doing so, make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge” (2008, 16). Qualitative research provides me the ability to enter into the *world* of the traumatized character who is scuffling with nightmares in an effort to survive.

The study will depend on the method of using the works of major trauma theorists to focus on analyzing some intrinsic aspects of psychological trauma alongside to reveal complications related to character’s psyche. References from trauma studies will be used as a device to elucidate emotional and mental health issues of the suffering child-character of the selected novel.

ECLIPSED BUT TERRIFYING CONSEQUENCES OF TRAUMA:

Psychological Trauma is illustrated in the character of a child-narrator who is repeatedly abused by her first cousin. One of the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), nightmares, start appearing in Morayo right after she is physically assaulted by her cousin, Bros T. On falling asleep, she finds herself playing with her sister but can hear a hissing sound from somewhere behind her. As she turns around, she finds “a black-necked spitting cobra” (Kilanko, 2012, 70). Stunned at this shocking and horrifying poisonous animal she “noticed that there was something very peculiar about it. While the cobra had the body of a snake, it had a familiar face” (Kilanko, 2012, 70). The face of the cobra is the spitting image of Bros T. In her sleep, she gets so horrified that

she screams loudly. Kahn and Mathie (2000) suggest that being raped by someone who is known to you, be it an acquaintance, family member or intimate partner can even more so, be overwhelming and confusing, as the horror of the experience may go unnamed and unacknowledged. The nightmare does not end here, but the snake dug its poisonous fangs into her body. She has a terrible feeling of “falling into a deep and endless hole” (Kilanko, 2012, 70). This nightmare becomes prophesy, as after this terrible experience of sexual assault, it becomes very difficult for her to enjoy her girlhood and adulthood. She tries to appear normal but she suffers from nightmares and fears which do not leave her. She has literally fallen into a very deep and endless hole. This not only affects her life before marriage but her fears do not leave her even after the marriage. These fears penetrate deep into the psyche of all those girls who are perpetrated inside the protective walls of the house because their trauma is doubly multiplied, one because they have undergone such a harsh treatment and other because such a harsh treatment is perpetrated by a close relation. Stones says, “[b]eing raped by someone you know is so unexpected that while the rape happens, there is a freezing and feeling vulnerable and helpless. In the time after the rape, life loses meaning and can lead to various reactions such as lack of energy, suicide ideation, social withdraw and changes in every day behaviour” (2013, 211). The word *falling* is repetitively used by the narrator to suggest the feeling of insult and degradation which she experiences. This feeling increases when she does not receive any positive consolation from her mother, for which she craves, until her wedding night. It is one night before her wedding that the mother comes to her room and appreciates her for her bravery.

The nightmare is so powerful that she confuses it with a reality. It is only when the morning sunlight enters into her room, she realizes that it is not a reality, but still she can feel her heart beating at a very fast pace. She feels that her mind has gone blank. The memories of night are so painful that she feels “nauseated” (Kilanko, 2012, 71). She does not want to accept the reality that she has been traumatized by her own cousin. She wants to squeeze her eyes and never wants to open them again, but she has to wash herself and her clothing which are all soiled. She does not have enough energy to walk so she “dragged” (Kilanko, 2012, 71) on the floor. The word *dragged* suggests that her condition is reduced to a small insect so severely beaten that it is about to die but then left alone to drag and fight for life on its own. She is feeling disgusted so she takes a long cold bath “to wash his taste and smell off [her]” (Kilanko, 2012, 72). Möller (2014) thinks that sexual assault represents one of the most traumatic experiences a person can be exposed to regarding the high incidence of PTSD in its aftermath compared to other traumas. Cold bath and a night long sleep normally refresh a person but she still has to drag herself. She is so shattered that she is finding difficult for herself to recollect enough energy to wash away the bloodstained clothes. It is ironical that the more she washes the blood-stains the brighter they grew. She keeps rubbing them until her fingers turned raw due to harshness of the washing soap. She is suffering from both physical and emotional sickness.

The anxiety of Morayo is not ending because she is finding it difficult to face her parents whose eyes are asking “the unasked questions” (Kilanko, 2012, 90). She cannot sleep peacefully because in her mind, the questions are going on and on with no end. On the other hand, she has started feeling ashamed of herself on the thought that why she let that happen repeatedly. She should have told it earlier to her parents. She is not sure why the resistance has become weaker as the time passed by. She cannot really get rid of the “shame that followed [her] around like a bad smell” (Kilanko, 2012, 90). The “unbroken silence” (Kilanko, 2012, 91) of her parents is getting heavier on her nerves as there are “many days when every part of [her] body [feel] too heavy to move, when lifting an arm or a leg in the morning [is] painful” (Kilanko, 2012, 91).

Along with nightmares, the frequency of migraine headaches is also increasing day by day. She feels herself so tightly caught up in a terrible situation that now she thinks of killing herself by taking over-dose of medicine to end her emotional pain. The intrusive thoughts of suicide often come to her mind, day and night; as she feels herself tightly clutched by her “heavy body” (Kilanko, 2012, 96). She is unable to concentrate on anything and wishes to float freely around. One day, when she is madly wishing for freedom, decides to put the whole bottle of medicine in her mouth. It is to her good luck that at that very moment, aunt Morenike knocks at the door, so she has to immediately spit the tablets into the commode. Aunt Morenike, on finding the commode full of painkillers, probed the matter. Morayo first time tells to anyone that she has been raped by Bros T. The moment she tells it, she feels “an intense sense of relief” (Kilanko, 2012, 98). Luckily she receives a positive response from her aunt who consoles her by embracing her but still she feels a pinching pain in her chest. Morayo has found such a person who has undergone the same experience at the age of just twelve by a very close friend of her father. On seeing the painful state of the niece, both start crying softly until they are left with no more tear. These tears comfort Morayo’s soul as at least she is somewhat successful in relieving the heavy burden of her heart. She feels ashamed and guilty for the fact that later on when this happened several times; she has started liking it and did not resist Bros T. To this, her aunt replies that she should not feel guilty because it is quite

natural and these are natural reflex actions on which one has no control. So she should stop condemning herself over mere physical reactions of human body. Her subsequent frequent visits to her aunt's house made her feel better but sad feelings are not leaving her. Her aunt tells her that a day will come when she will begin to feel a little better. That day when she will begin to feel a little better seems too far away. In this prolonged state of trauma, she has always received this advice from her aunt that a person is supposed to take care of herself with full effort. Unfortunately, Morayo is denied support by her mother.

Again when her parents decide that Eniayo is going to boarding school, it is as if the gaze of the mother is suggesting that they are sending her because she has failed Eniayo as an elder sister. Morayo does not know what to do. Her mother is not realizing that she herself has failed to be a mother as she is neither understanding her trauma nor consoling her. Morayo tries smiling while seeing off her sister with fresh tears in her eyes. The lump in her throat grows larger but the mother never asks her about her mental-health and emotional well-being. Her sister has gone to the boarding school, aunt Adunni has gone to take care of her aging mother, and both the father and the mother stay away from home, busy in their professional lives. What is increasing is the stress of Morayo on the fact that her parents still have not spoken to her about Bros T. On receiving no consolation from her parents, her anxiety increases and her helplessness becomes overwhelming. When her sister leaves the home for boarding house she wonders *who needs her* because the mother has not given her that love for which she is craving. She is persistently feeling the pain because her parents, especially her mother to whom a child feels more attached has never tried to soothe her. Judith Herman says,

“Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group her humanity.” (1992, 214)

On her return to her home, she finds that not much has changed even “Bros T’s ghost still walked around the house” (Kilanko, 2012, 225). To live in such an environment is rather painful so she starts looking for a job to remain busy because nightmares do not let her pass life in a normal mode. Her heart feels heavy and she wants to feel lighter but it is beyond her control. She finds it impossible to do so. Her younger sister, Enaiyo, is now grown up enough to console her. Her sister says that all what has happened to her is not her fault. She thinks that it might be true but the pain in her chest and the heaviness of her heart are not letting her *believe* that.

These nightmares appear in her married life because the moment the husband comes closer to the wife, Morayo is reminded of the horrible incident. She feels so nervous that she sobs for the rest of the night. This disturbs the newly wedded groom to whom she assures that the fears will go away with the passage of time. Sometimes a random touch of the husband makes her scream in the middle of the night. She does not let him turn off the bedroom light because she wants to see his face clearly. She has been through psychological trauma and cannot get over it even after getting married to a loving and co-operative husband. He offers his help to her but she herself does not know what to ask for, what to do and how to come out of this painful state of mind. She keeps saying to herself and her husband that soon everything will be alright. The physical abuse leaves lasting impact on the psyche of the victim, as Zabihzadeh says, “Physical abuse against women [is] the most controversial, visible and obvious forms of domestic violence [which] can be simply defined as any act or behaviour that causes actual physical pain or harm to the victim, leaving behind severe consequences that are not just physical in nature, but mental as well” (2015, 55).

CONCLUSION:

It is seen that the writer has intentionally selected the child-narrator to put forward the truthfulness of the situation. Morayo is just a child when she is repeatedly abused by her cousin, a fact that is later on acknowledged by Bros T when he meets Morayo after fifteen years. He realizes that at that time he was a grown-up man while Morayo was still a child, so he should not have exploited her. It is seen that the attitude of the mother towards her daughter worsens the mental health of Morayo. Though incest is an untellable reality of life but discussing such hard facts of life with close relations reduces anxiety of the survivor of trauma; otherwise the psychological trauma intensifies—stealing away the pleasure of life. The silence of Morayo’s mother is partly related to the cultural training of African society where women are trained to silently bear the sufferings rather than protesting against them. This result in severe repercussions like the victim’s sleep is marked by nightmares. When past refuses to leave the individual, the after-effects of deteriorated mental health can be seen even after the successful marriage of Morayo with a sincere life partner. Such private experiences of trauma should not be ignored because they become hurdle to the community’s process of resolution.

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