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The Compounding Pain of Familial Betrayal and Institutional Failure in Nigerian Rape Narratives

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of rape in Nigerian literature, a topic often shrouded in cultural silence and stigma. It argues that selected Nigerian novels provide a crucial platform for exposing the compounded pain of sexual violence, a pain intensified by familial betrayal and institutional failure. Drawing on transactional reader-response theory, this qualitative study analyses Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* to explore how cultural norms perpetuate the suffering of rape victims. Using close reading as an analytical tool, the study examines how characterisation, plot, and literary devices depict the psychological aftermath of rape. The transactional reader-response theory is applied to understand the dynamic interaction between the text and the reader's interpretation of these traumatic experiences. The findings reveal that victims often endure self-blame, isolation, and a lack of institutional support, with priorities like family honour aggravating their trauma. This research emphasises literature's critical role in challenging harmful norms and fostering empathy, recommending awareness campaigns, policy reforms and community based initiatives to protect survivors and prevent further harm.

Keywords: Nigerian Literature, Pain, Rape, Reader-Response theory, Stigma, Trauma.

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Introduction

Rape remains a common and extremely painful experience, particularly in societies where cultural norms shield offenders and silence victims. Sexual violence is frequently treated with institutional negligence and stigmatisation in Nigeria, as it is in many other parts of the world. According to Worugji et al. (2024), the Nigerian Criminal Code defines rape as having unlawful carnal knowledge of a girl or woman, without her consent or with her consent, if the consent is obtained by force or by employing threats of any kind or by fear of harm. Under the pretense of custom and cultural reverence, millions of women worldwide are routinely victimised and degraded, according to a mountain of facts and observations. Worrisomely, even the most severe manifestations of this violence are frequently accepted as inevitable, with women often expected to bear these threats in silence, a dynamic that upholds a detrimental cultural norm (Akpan & Akpan, 2022).

This tactic acceptance is reinforced by deeply embedded cultural narratives. Critically, over-idealisation of female attractiveness and sexual assault can be portrayed not only as objects of male sexual fantasy, but also as individuals whose pedigrees contradict social moral and ethical rules (Ogundipe & Ayoade, 2024). This conceptual framework illustrates a distressing paradox in which women are both hypersexualised and held to unrealistic purity standards, producing an environment in which perpetrators are frequently protected by distorted moral arguments. Nigerian literature has faced this devastating issue within a culture of silence and stigma, using the novel as a powerful tool to expose rape culture and magnify victim's voices. Herman defines "rape culture" as societal contexts in which sexual assault is normalised and accepted (qtd in O'Neal & Hayes, 2020), a phenomenon sustained by harmful myths that sway perceptions and produce unjust outcomes (Leverick, 2020).

The alarming prevalence of this violence is stark. A study on abuse against women in Nigeria found that of the 8,061 women who participated in the poll, 6.4% experienced forced sex, 16.7% were slapped, and 18.2% were humiliated by their partners. In total, there were 14.7% sexual, 52.3% emotional, and 37.5% physical acts of aggression. There is a strong correlation between emotional/sexual and physical violence. But there was no proof of a cause and effect (Tesfaw & Mulunehy, 2022). As Sanyal (2019) asserts, rape is more than a word; it is a whole story, part cautionary tale, half thrilling fiction, with a beginning and a terrible finale. One wants to put the book down and read something else just by hearing the word. It is a devastating event that profoundly affects the victims and can be exceedingly challenging to face or talk about. Like sore areas on the body, Sanyal (2019) also uses the term "rape" to describe a cultural sore spot, pointing to problems we are too afraid to address. The stigma surrounding sexuality and trauma in Nigeria's communally based society frequently silences victims, allowing criminals to act with impunity and contributing to a breakdown in justice (Fabiyi, 2021).

Literary depictions powerfully illustrate this complex terrain of victimisation, power, and distorted morality. For instance, the story of eight-year-old Ama in Chika Unigwe's On Black

Sister Street (2009) serves as an example; she is often told to go away or keep to herself by her mother when she wants some closure: "Go… do not disturb us here…be a good girl and run along" (Unigwe, 2009, p. 80). Ama hopes her mother will see the pain in her heart and enquire about the situation. Her overly emotional crying frequently resulted in red eyes, but her callous mother thought it was "Apollo." After turning eight, Ama's father had sexually assaulted her; it had become a recurring event that she dreaded. As a result, Ama learnt how to conceal secrets and chose to communicate with her room's walls, whom she saw as her friends.

> The grunty, sticky, witness-like pap that gushed out of him was warm and disgusting, and she complained to the walls that she would never eat pap again. The walls heard about her attempts to push him away when he lay on top of her, but she lacked the strength to move a mountain (Unigwe, 2009, p. 84-85).

Ama is disappointed when she eventually finds the strength to inform her mother about the abuse, since her mother calls her a "poor sinner" and begs her husband to pardon Ama.

> Do you know what he used to do to me when I was younger, Mama? I was raped by him. Night next night. He would come into my room and make me extend my legs so he could see them. When you believed I had Apollo, remember? (Unigwe, 2009, p. 93).

Her mother gave her a slap across the face for ever having the audacity to "talk to her father like that". From the mother's perspective, the only explanation for the need for such unprecedented language could only be insanity. Even though Cyril is not Ama's biological father, his behaviour is unacceptable and doesn't excuse the pain he caused to her. Ama was forced to live with a different family rather than receiving the justice and compassion she deserved, especially from her mother. This tragically exemplifies how perpetrators are granted ethical impunity, while victims are burdened with blame. Similarly, studies have shown how victim-blaming is fueled by myths suggesting that women's clothing invites assault, erroneously shifting culpability from perpetrator to victim (Martins & Abdullahi, 2021). Women's dress choices do not equate to consent; this destructive and inaccurate perception that women's clothing choices contribute to rape fosters victim-blaming and rape culture. This argument places the blame for sexual activity on the victim rather than the perpetrator, absolving the victim of culpability for the crime committed against them. Literature further counters this by foregrounding rape as a crime of power and control, not sexual desire. For example, Uzodinma Iweala's Beasts of No Nation (2005), narrates the account of the atrocities of a child soldier who committed rape with the support of older soldiers – "Strika is pulling down his shorts and showing that he is man to this woman while I am holding her one leg and another soldier is holding the other. She is screaming, DEVIL BLESS YOU! DEVIL BORN YOU!" (Iweala, 2005, p. 48). Also, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun (2006), the graphic

depiction of soldiers committing heinous acts, such as raping pregnant women before opening their wombs, and the gang rape of a Biafran bar girl by Ugwu and his fellow soldiers, Ugwu is hesitant to participate in the act till his comrades begin to tease him, "Target Destroyer is afraid!... Target Destroyer, aren't you a man?... He (Ugwu) did not look at her face or at the man pinning her down, or at anything at all as he moved quickly and felt his climax…a self-loathing release" (Adichie, 2006, p. 365).

These narratives also challenge the stereotypical portrayal of victims as either "innocent" or "deserving" (Nilsson, 2019). In Lola Shoneyin's The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (2010), fifteen-year-old Bola accepts a ride from a stranger called Thomas on a rainy day because she was running late to get home from her singing practice and because "he looked respectable and not like the thugs her mother described" (Shoneyin 2010, p. 111). She followed him to his house because she "just came to fuck," he says, revealing his true intentions as he shows her around his home (Shoneyin 2010, p. 111). Thomas struck her, grabbed her hair, and threw her onto his bed as his hostility turned to fury. He overpowered her and pinned her down, even though she tried to defend herself by crossing her legs and pleading with him to stop. Her struggles only made him angrier, so he covered her face with a pillow, leaving her too weak to resist and gasping for air. He growled, "If you don't want to die, lie still with your legs apart!" in a terrible moment. He growled (Shoneyin 2010, p. 115).

This text presents a horrifying picture of masculine dominance and sexual assault, where the victim's body and life are brutally controlled by the abuser. He displays his physical strength and authority by using violence to silence her objections, pin her down, and suffocate her. His ominous order to "lie still with your legs apart" emphasises the destructive effects of toxic masculinity and the necessity of permission and respect. It also vividly reveals his belief in his entitlement to dominate and dictate the victim's sexual submission. As the attack is taking place, Little Bola is left wondering, "Where had this monster come from?" (Shoneyin 2010, p. 115). Compared to the man who had protected her from the rain, he is not the same. She decides not to speak about the incident because she is no longer the daughter that every parent wants, and Thomas escapes punishment for what he did. Bola's internal torment and subsequent silence underscore the lifelong consequences and the societal failure to hold perpetrators accountable, reflecting the very pedigrees of power and respectability that can negate ethical codes.

Literature Review

The persistent culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual violence in Nigeria has been critically engaged by contemporary authors such as Yejide Kilanko and Nnedi Okorafor. Existing scholarship on this literary intervention is generally organised around three interconnected themes: the influence of patriarchal standards, the portrayal of psychological trauma and the novel as a tool for social awareness. Scholars focus on the patriarchal structures that protect perpetrators. Scholars argue that cultural norms often prioritise male dominance and family

honour, creating a shield for assailants while stigmatising and silencing victims (Ogundipe & Ayoade, 2024). This dynamic is investigated in analyses of gender based violence, where societal complicity is viewed as a major enabler of abuse (Nutsukpo, 2018). A second, solid strand of research uses trauma theory to investigate survivors' significant psychological devastation, including emotional collapse, self-blame, and long term suffering (Eziuzor & Okwuchukwu, 2025; Ike etal., 2025). A third area emphasises literature's transformative owner, placing literature as more than just storytelling, but as a critical avenue to healing, witness, and social resistance (Akpan & Akpan, 2022; Stefanova, 2024).

However, a major gap exists. While these studies expertly explore either the larger cultural background or the individuals' personal trauma, they frequently regard these as parallel rather than overlapping occurrences. There is insufficient scholarly attention paid to the unique layered suffering that occurs when the victims two most basic safety nets: family and societal institutions, fail at the same time. Prior research has acknowledged that families can be sources of conflict (Nutsukpo, 2018), but a thorough analysis of how the family unit transitions from a presumed sanctuary to an active site of secondary victimisation through blame, disbelief, and enforced silence remains underdeveloped. Furthermore, the absence of justice in these literary texts indicates a systemic institutional failure that collectively abandons survivors.

This study aims to fill the gap, by delving into the interplay between familial betrayal and institutional impunity in Kilanko's Daughters Who Walk This Path and Okorafor's Who Fears Death, it reveals a more extensive and terrible architecture of harm. This study goes beyond studying the initial act of sexual violence to criticise the interconnected social and familial systems that compound trauma, obstruct healing, and create a culture in which sexual violence is tactically tolerated.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on textual analysis as its primary method of inquiry. The study is a comparative literary analysis. The primary data sources are two contemporary Nigerian novels Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* (2013) and Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010). These texts are selected based on their explicit and central engagement with the theme of rape and its aftermath, the extensive exploration of familial and societal dynamics in response to sexual violence; and their recognition within African criticism. The data were collected through close reading, a method involving careful, line by line analysis of the selected texts.

The analysis was guided by Louise Rosenblatt's transactional reader-response theory, which holds that meaning is created through a dynamic interaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). This theory is especially relevant to this study since it recognises that interpretations are influenced by the readers' cultural background, personal experiences, and perspective (Elsherief, 2017). The analysis involved two main stages. First, a text centered analysis was used to identify and thematically code narrative aspects relating to pain, betrayal,

power, resistance, and societal norms within the selected excerpts. Second, the Reader-Response application aimed to determine how these literary features might engage a reader, potentially generating empathy, challenging preconceived notions about rape, or encouraging a critical understanding of the victims' grief. This dual focus enables the study to look at both what the texts say about rape culture and how they can actively seek to modify a reader's perspective of it.

Familial Betrayal and Institutional Failure in Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* and Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*

In Daughters Who Walk This Path, Morayo, a compassionate and bright young girl on the cusp of adolescence, is violated by her cousin, Tayo, also known as Bros T. Morayo falls ill, and her parents leave her in Bros T's care, unaware of the sinister events that will unfold. Bros T and his friends engage in a heated conversation about Morayo, appearing to debate who will have sexual relations with her. Tayo is annoyed that his friends have eyes for his cousin, "Niran, what kind of nonsense talk is this?... Morayo is still a small girl. Do you think she is one of those Havana Prostitutes you parade as your girlfriends?" (Kilanko, 2013, p. 66). Morayo overhears her name mentioned, and her cousin's seemingly noble defense of her honour is later revealed to be self-serving and far from altruistic. Tayo's unreliability is evident throughout the book, as he consistently engages in deceitful behaviour, such as lying, stealing, and breaking promises.

He also displays inappropriate behaviour towards Morayo and her Aunt Adunni, who works as a help in her home; his acts include unwanted physical contact and spying while Adunni bathes. Despite his transgressions, his mother consistently enables his behaviour by protecting him from consequences and shielding him from public accountability, further promoting his harmful actions because he is an only child. His reprehensible actions culminate in the violation of Morayo's trust and the commission of rape, driven by a possessive desire to claim her sexual innocence. As he threatens her, "Stop this nonsense, or I'll break your little neck. It is time a real man makes you a woman before one of your little boyfriends spoils you for good" (Kilanko, 2013, p. 68), his words reveal a disturbing sense of entitlement. Tayo eventually pushes himself into her "unwelcoming body (Kilanko, 2013, p. 68)."

This disturbing mindset is echoed in The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives when Thomas justifies his assault on Bola by claiming he has made her a woman and that she should be grateful. The belief that they have the exclusive right to 'make a woman' out of someone, denying the individual's right in their own sexual experiences, is a deeply troubling and problematic mindset that suggests a profound psychological issue. Especially when the victim is underage.

In Who Fears Death, Binta suffers sexual abuse at the hands of her father. This secret is revealed during her Eleventh Year Rite, a ceremony meant to mark her transition to adulthood and grant her the courage to speak out against injustice. This ceremony, which includes female

circumcision, is meant to bring honour and respect to her family, but instead, it exposes the horrific truth of her experiencing sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Although the elders punish her father with whipping, this does not put an end to the abuse; Binta's traumatic experience has made her more reserved than others "Binta always had her eyes downcast and spoke little when around others. Her father's abuse cut deep (Okorafor, 2010, p. 49)." The character of Binta depicts how the experience can use strong emotional pain, which leads to withdrawal, suppressed emotions and anxiety in social interactions.

Binta's pain eventually leads to a deep-seated resentment towards her father. She contemplated killing him to end it all, as the punishment he received from the elders was not enough to put an end to his atrocities, revealing in a conversation she had with her friends, "Remember how the women helped me during our Eleventh Rite? If they hadn't helped me that night, I was going to kill him, Yes, I was going to poison him that very next day (Okorafor, 2010, p. 132)." This quote highlights the intense anger she masked with her silence towards her father. Considering the social context as well, the story is set in post-apocalyptic Sudan, with limited resources and justice systems against rape.

In Daughters Who Walk This Path, Morayo also suffers in silence, having learned from her father through a story he once shared, "If you don't want everyone to know your secret, don't share it with anyone (Kilanko 14). Morayo has no one to confide in while facing the abuse. The most heartbreaking aspect was her mother's shocking insensitivity, failing to recognise the signs of abuse happening right under her roof, being perpetuated by her nephew. Morayo's mother's constant warnings about boys only confused Morayo and silenced her. Her mother had earlier said, "If you let a boy touch any part of your body… I will find out. I will smell it on you, and I will know (Kilanko, 2013, p. 40)." After the rape incident, Morayo waited in vain for her mother to notice, thinking, "I kept waiting for Mummy to notice something different about me. A different way of walking. A new scent. Had she not said she could smell a boy's touch on me (Kilanko, 2013, p. 76)." Morayo's mother, being aware of Tayo's track record of negative behaviour, fails to protect her daughters; instead, she prioritises their family honour, constantly warning Morayo not to bring shame to the family. She focused on the outside and failed to check if all was well within her home.

Parents must be honest and open with their children about sexuality and boundaries, providing accurate education and a safe space for them to share their experiences without fear of judgment. Instead of relying on harmful metaphors and scare tactics, parents should foster a culture of trust and support, empowering their children to speak up and seek help when needed. Parents should engage using age-appropriate information on sexuality and consent, and actively listen to their children, promoting healthy family relationships and high self-esteem in their children.

After the rape, Morayo's struggles with self-worth, suicidal thoughts and envy towards her sister stemmed from the belief that her life journey is filled with hardship while her sister's path is comparatively easier. Similarly, Morayo's aunt, Morenike, suffers a brutal rape by a

family friend, Chief Komolafe, who was supposed to drop her off at school. They learn about an armed robbery attack on the way, so Chief Komolafe decides that they spend the night in a hotel at Aiyetoro. He tells Morenike to come to his hotel room as he has something to discuss with her, only for Morenike to meet him sitting on the bed wearing only a short towel that barely covers him. Embarrassed, Morenike opts to live, but he tells her to sit beside him, stroking the back of her neck; he comments, You are such a big girl now… When did you become so beautiful?

> Suddenly, Chief Komolafe wrestled her onto the bed and rolled on top of her. When Morenike opened her mouth to scream, Chief Komolafe clamped his hand over her mouth. Morenike jabbed him hard in his side with her bony elbow… he slapped her across the face. Her head snapped backwards, hitting the wooden bedpost. As Morenike drifted away, she could hear his stomach slapping against her body (Kilanko, 2013, p. 108).

This horrific incident occurs when she is just fifteen years old and on the cusp of being selected as her school's head girl, with her future bright and full of promise. Shockingly, the driver, Mr Adeoti, jumps to conclusions, making assumptions about her character without even asking her what happened after he witnesses her leaving Chief Komolafe's room the next day; already condemning her "to be following an old baba for money (Kilanko, 2013, p.108)." On the drive to her school, Mr Adeoti repeatedly gives Morenike lascivious glances, harboring misconceptions that she is having romantic relationships with the old man for financial gain. This devastating experience not only shatters her innocence but also highlights the appalling victim-blaming that often follows such traumatic events. The rape has a drastic impact on Morenike's life. She becomes pregnant, is expelled from school, and is banished from her home by her father, who refuses to acknowledge Chief Komolafe's guilt and instead blames Morenike for the pregnancy. He shames his wife, too, for failing to raise her properly. However, her mother stands by her, courageously confronting Chief Komolafe in his office, where he fails to deny the accusations. When he shamefully suggests that Morenike's mother is responsible for her daughter's behaviour, saying, "And so? Is that why you think you have the right to come into my office uninvited? Just because you neglected to teach your wayward daughter how to keep her legs together? (Kilanko, 2013, p. 117)." Chief Komolafe's behaviour is a consequence of normalised sexual violence, perpetuated by inadequate social justice systems that fail to hold perpetrators accountable. His high social status further emboldens him, making him unapologetic and confident that his victims' demands for justice will be disregarded. The power imbalance between Chief Komolafe and Morenike's mother undermines their efforts to seek justice.

The lack of effective justice systems, social and economic power imbalances, and cultural normalisation of sexual violence enable Chief Komolafe's actions. This issue extends beyond local contexts, reflecting broader societal concerns, highlighting the potential for exploitation.

Likewise, in Nnedi Okorafor's novel Who Fears Death, Najeeba faces banishment from her home and community after being brutally raped by Daib, a Nuru man. The violent assault is described as follows:

> He dragged her by her braids, overpowered her, and sexually assaulted her with a knife to her throat...He left her exposed and battered, her midsection bruised and open to the sun (Okorafor, 2010, p. 19-20).

The traumatic experience lasts for two hours, and upon returning home, her husband sends her off to protect his honour, following the customs of his people, though he still loved his wife. Najeeba is left to wander in the desert, eventually giving birth to her child, Onyesonwu, an Ewu, which means a child conceived from rape. This child is hated and made an outcast and narrowly escapes being stoned to death because of the nature of her conception. Concealing the trauma of rape is one thing, but it's entirely different when one's physical appearance publicly reveals the painful truth of being born from rape. In Onyesonwu's case, her mixed skin tone, resembling sand, serves as an unmistakable indicator of her conception through violence, given the stark contrast between her parents' skin tones – her mother Najeeba's dark skin and her father Daib's light skin.

Morenike faces merciless judgment; her visible pregnancy becomes a subject of gossip and a cautionary tale for others, without anyone offering support or listening to her traumatic story. Sometimes she prayed her baby would die in her stomach so she would become free from the stigma and resume her life that had been put to a pause.

> As her stomach grew bigger, stares and whispers followed her as she walked along the village paths; she could hear the village women warning their daughters. Come here! Giggling like a fool just because that riffraff boy looked at you sideways. Have you seen Mama Omu's daughter?... Have I not told you? That is what happens when you let a boy ruin you. I hear she was so smart with her books, too; she could've been somebody in life (Kilanko, 2013, p. 121-122).

Morenike and Morayo form a profound bond, united by their shared trauma. Morayo finally finds the courage to expose Tayo's misconduct to the family, leading to his swift departure from the household. Morayo's university years depict her struggles as she seeks validation through promiscuous relationships; she no longer cares about putting up the facade of modesty, that she "wanted to be in control (Kilanko, 2013, p. 204) as opposed to the domineering relations she had with her cousin and rapist Tayo. Morayo's behavior can be seen as a coping mechanism for unresolved trauma or to fill the emotional void left by Tayo. Every individual reacts to trauma differently. Her aunt Morenike invests her energy in getting an education and creating a comfortable life for her son. Morenike is disappointed in Morayo's choices and attempts to guide her towards change and healing, highlighting the diverse ways individuals respond to trauma.

In Who Fears Death, Onyesonwu, a product of rape, faces attempted rape by a group of men in her society. The Ewu, deemed non-human, are relegated to menial labour and forced prostitution, despite being perceived as strangely beautiful by some. This paradox underscores the intersectional nature of oppression, where marginalised groups face both objectification and dehumanisation. Onyesonwu's response to the attempted rape is noteworthy. Contrary to societal expectations of silence and submission, she exercises agency by harnessing her supernatural abilities to repel the assailants. This act of resistance not only ensures her physical safety but also subverts the power dynamics perpetuating violence against individuals conceived of rape in the novel.

Morayo's journey towards healing begins after meeting Ladi, a kind-hearted Christian who genuinely cares for her. However, their relationship is complicated when Morayo, still wounded from her past, seeks validation through physical intimacy. Despite Ladi's reluctance, she seduces him to sleep with her, ultimately leading to their breakup. Deep-seated self-doubt and body shame linger, stemming from the trauma Morayo endured. Years later, confronting her rapist, Tayo, reopens old wounds. Shockingly, Tayo, now married and wealthy, offered only a hollow apology, claiming he was "just a child" at the time. This encounter highlights the stark contrast between Tayo's effortless redemption and Morayo's ongoing struggle. While he moves on with his life, Morayo continues to bear the weight of her pain, underscoring the lasting impact of trauma and the need for true accountability.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the pain of rape extends far beyond the act itself, deepened by familial betrayal and institutional failure. Kilanko and Okorafor's narratives not only depict trauma but also critique the cultural norms that enable it. Through careful literary analysis and reader-response theory, this research underscores literatures capacity to foster empathy, challenge stereotypes and advocate for social change. The findings call for a multifaceted response, improved support services for survivors, legal reforms to ensure accountability, and educational initiatives to shift cultural attitudes. Parents and communities must create environments where survivors are heard, not shamed. By engaging with these narratives, readers are invited to reflect on their own roles in either perpetuating or challenging rape culture.

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