



Portrayal of Culture of Silence and Stigmatisation of Sexually Abused Women Characters in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu*

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Abstract

Previous studies on rape and its detrimental have shown that three out of five women have been victims of sexual abuse in some point in life. Having sex with somebody without the person's consent is rape. The presentation of rape in literally works is an extension of the reality of the act. The study depends on content analysis as tool for the analysis. Emphasis is however placed on the issue of rape in *Kintu* by Makumbi Jennifer. The subsequent result shows challenges faced by the victims of rape and ways the character(s) cope with the disturbing effects of rape on the family, the response of the society to the rape victims and the culture of silence among the victims. This study reveals, through the authors' portrayal of the characters and events in the novel, the harmful outcome of rape. The study concludes that rape victims generally suffer in silence.

Keywords: Rape, Stigmatisation, Portrayal, Culture, Characters, Silence, Victims

Introduction

Rape is the act of violently having sex with somebody without their consent. Others have demarcated rape as a sexual penetration by one person against another person without the permission of the victim (World health organisation (2019). Rape is defined as any act of non-consensual sexual intercourse and can involve physical, emotional, and psychological assault (Glowacka, 2021). Sexual abuse stands as one of the most prevalent forms of violent crime and human right violations worldwide, deeply entrenched within the broader spectrum of gender-based violence (World Health Organisation, 2020). Across the globe, it is estimated that about 150 million females endure its devastating impacts, reflecting a pervasive and urgent societal issue. Within the Nigerian context, sexual abuse affects approximately 25% of women, with its roots intricately entwined within cultural norms and patriarchal structures (WHO, 2020).

These cultural norms, including strong gender roles, limited educational opportunities for girls, and a pervasive culture of shame surrounding sexual matters, contribute to the silencing of victims and the perpetuation of stigma (Aborisade, 2022). Despite legal frameworks such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015, their implementation and enforcement remain challenging; thereby hindering access to justice and support for survivors. (Glowacka, 2021; Kreft, 2023; Mayra et al., 2022). This culture of silence, deeply rooted in gender inequalities and societal expectations, hinders survivors' access to support services and perpetuates victim-blaming (Azeez, 2020; The Foresight, 2020; Aborisade, 2021).

In Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's (2020) *Kintu*, the portrayal of sexual abuse and stigma offers a compelling exploration of the intricate fabric of Nigerian society. The narrative delves into how deeply entrenched cultural norms and patriarchal structures influence the experiences of sexually abused women, mirroring the real-world challenges faced by survivors.

Through the characters in *Kintu*, Makumbi unveils the societal expectations that enforce silence around sexual abuse and perpetuate the stigma endured by survivors. This rich exploration provides valuable insights into the lived realities of sexually abused women in Nigeria, shedding light on the societal mechanisms that perpetuate their suffering.

"The crowd swelled. They came carrying mbukuli clubs, hoes and sticks.

Women where hysterical They held firewood and stones and hoes.



*They started stoning the abductors but one of the men cautioned,
'Hold on, the police will see us'.*

This poignant quotation from *Kintu* encapsulates the pervasive silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse experienced by women in the society. It underscores the complex dynamics where survivors often find themselves silenced by cultural expectations and fear of tarnishing their family's image.

The culture of silence and stigmatisation surrounding sexually abused women in the novels reflects the complex landscape faced by survivors in the country (Aborisade, 2022). Novels like *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta highlight how cultural norms contribute to the silence of survivors and the imposition of stigma (Aborisade, 2022). These novels illustrate the correlation between cultural expectations and the ability to address sexual abuse openly, echoing real-world challenges faced by women, particularly adolescents (Aborisade, 2022).

Furthermore, the literature mirrors the ambiguity surrounding the definition of sexual abuse across cultures, as depicted in literary works like *Idu* (Aborisade, 2022). This ambiguity contributes to the challenges survivors face in discussing and addressing sexual abuse openly, both in the novels and in broader discourse.

The COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 led to an increase in reported cases of rape in Nigeria, according to the Nigerian Police Force and the National Human Rights Commission. (Kwaskebe, J. (2020) This shocking rise was likely due to a number of factors, including increased strain and economic difficulties during the lockdown, as well as decreased access to resources and support for victims. The impact of this catastrophe has been far-reaching, and it has highlighted the need for more effective prevention and response measures to be put in place to protect women and girls in Nigeria (Kwaskebe, 2020; Foresight, 2020).

Victims of rape may experience a range of physical, psychological, and social penalties, including post-traumatic stress disorder, misery, anxiety, and isolation (Glowacka, 2021). Despite the prevalence of rape and other forms of sexual abuse, many victims hesitate to come forward due to fear of stigma, shame, and retaliation (Azeez, 2020). The culture of silence surrounding rape in Nigeria perpetuates the cycle of violence and undermines efforts to support survivors and hold perpetrators accountable. Sexual abuse of women in Nigeria reflects a complex interplay of cultural norms, societal attitudes, and systemic challenges. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive legislation, initiatives to combat stigma, and efforts to empower survivors to seek justice and support.

Understanding the Culture of Silence

The culture of silence regarding sexual abuse encompasses a range of attitudes, behaviours, and societal norms that discourage open discussion and acknowledgment of instances of sexual violence (Glowacka, 2021). This culture is characterised by a reluctance or refusal to address sexual abuse, often resulting in the normalisation or trivialisation of such experiences (Kreft, 2023). Manifestations of the culture of silence include victim-blaming, disbelief of survivors' accounts, and societal pressure to keep incidents of sexual abuse hidden from public view (Azeez, 2020). Various cultural and societal factors contribute to the perpetuation of the culture of silence surrounding sexual abuse. Patriarchal structures, which prioritise male authority and control, may lead to the marginalisation of survivors' voices and the protection of perpetrators (Kreft, 2023). Additionally, cultural norms and traditional beliefs about gender roles and sexuality can reinforce the stigma associated with sexual abuse and discourage survivors from coming forward (Azeez, 2020). Religious institutions and leaders may also play a role in maintaining silence by discouraging the discussion of sensitive topics related to sexuality and abuse (Kreft, 2023).

The culture of silence surrounding sexual abuse has profound consequences for survivors and their communities. For survivors, silence can exacerbate feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation, making it difficult to seek help or support (Mayra et al., 2022). The normalisation of sexual abuse and the reluctance to address it can also perpetuate cycles of violence and impunity, allowing perpetrators to continue their abusive behaviour unchecked (Aborisade, 2022). In communities where silence prevails, survivors may face social stigma and discrimination, further compounding their trauma and hindering their recovery (Azeez, 2020). Overall, the culture of silence surrounding sexual abuse has far-reaching implications for



survivors' well-being and the broader societal response to this issue, highlighting the urgent need for greater awareness and action.

Prevalence of Sexual Abuse

Existing literature provides comprehensive insights into the prevalence and impact of sexual abuse globally. Studies indicate that sexual abuse stands as one of the most prevalent forms of violence and human right violations, deeply entrenched within the broader spectrum of gender-based violence (World Health Organisation, 2020). Approximately, 150 million females worldwide endure its devastating impacts, highlighting it as a pervasive and urgent societal issue (World Health Organisation, 2020).

Within some specific contexts, such as Nigeria, sexual abuse affects approximately 25% of women, with its roots intricately entwined within cultural norms and patriarchal structures (Aborisade, 2022). These cultural norms, including strong gender roles and a pervasive culture of shame surrounding sexual matters, contribute to the silencing of victims and the perpetuation of stigma (Aborisade, 2022). Despite legal frameworks such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP Act) of 2015, implementation and enforcement remain challenging, hindering access to justice and support for survivors (Aborisade, 2022).

Moreover, research highlights the countless practices of sensual exploitation comprising rape, carnal mugging, voluptuous harassment, and other unwanted erotic contacts, occurring in diverse settings such as homes, workplaces, and public spaces (World Health Organisation, 2020). The impact of sexual abuse on survivors is profound, leading to long-lasting physical, psychological, and social penalties, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and isolation (World Health Organisation, 2020). Existing literature on sexual related violence underscores the urgent need for comprehensive efforts to address sexual abuse, including raising awareness, improving support services for survivors, and challenging societal norms and structures that perpetuate silence and stigma (Aborisade, 2022; World Health Organisation, 2020).

Stigmatisation of Sexually Abused Women

Stigmatisation refers to the social process of labeling, stereotyping, and marginalising individuals or groups based on certain characteristics or experiences (Kakon, 2021). However, in the context of sexual abuse, stigmatisation manifests as the assignment of blame, shame, and judgement onto survivors, leading to feelings of worthlessness, self-doubt, and psychological distress (Aborisade, 2021). This pervasive stigma can have profound implications for survivors' mental health, contributing to conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Adimula & Ijere, 2018).

Cultural norms and attitudes play a significant role in perpetuating stigma surrounding sexual abuse. In many societies, there exists a prevailing belief that survivors are somehow responsible for their victimisation, leading to victim-blaming and the invalidation of survivors' experiences (Abubakar, 2016). These cultural norms often prioritise the preservation of social harmony and reputation over the well-being of survivors, further perpetuating silence and stigma (Stevenson Omoera & Elegbe, 2019). Additionally, gendered expectations and stereotypes contribute to the stigmatisation of sexually abused women, reinforcing notions of female vulnerability and passivity (Abdu & Shehu, 2019).

Stigma surrounding sexual abuse intersects with other forms of oppression, such as gender, class, and ethnicity, creating compounded experiences of marginalisation for survivors (Stockstill & Mele, 2020). Women from marginalised communities may face additional barriers to seeking support and accessing resources, as societal prejudices based on race, socioeconomic status, and other factors intersect with the stigma of sexual abuse (Ahmad, Nadarajan, & Bahari, 2020). This intersectionality highlights the complex dynamics of stigma and underscores the importance of addressing multiple forms of oppression in efforts to combat the stigmatisation of sexually abused women.

Statement of the Problem

The study addresses the persistent culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse in Nigerian society, as depicted in *Kintu*. Despite efforts to raise awareness, survivors face challenges in receiving



support, influenced by societal norms and patriarchal structures. While existing research acknowledges the portrayal of sexual abuse in literature, there is a gap in understanding specific contributions of literature to challenging this culture. This study aims to analyse how the selected novel portrays the culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse, exploring their impact on societal responses and the potential for raising awareness (Aborisade, 2022; The Foresight, 2020). This study will be looking at the gap created in the novel *Kintu* on the issue of portraying culture of silence and stigma and the literary techniques and devices that contribute to or challenge the culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu*.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to investigate the culture of silence and stigmatisation of sexually abused women in *Kintu*. The objectives are to:

- i. examine how *Kintu* portray the culture of silence and stigma through selected characters in the novel; and
- ii. identify specific literary techniques and devices that contribute to or challenge the culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu*.

Research Questions

Research questions based on the aims and objectives

- i. How does Jennifer Nansubuga's Makumbi's novel *Kintu* portray the culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse through selected characters in the novel?
- ii. What specific literary techniques and devices are used in *Kintu* to portray silence and stigma around sexual abuse?

Theoretical Framework

This scholarly examination utilises the Freudian psychoanalytical theory as its theoretical framework to explore the far-reaching effect of rape and sexual abuse as represented in *Kintu* by Makumbi Jennifer. Through a psychoanalytical lens, rape can be viewed as a manifestation of deeply ingrained, repressed desires and unresolved conflicts that are expressed through violent sexual acts. This psychological phenomenon exacerbated by the societal culture of silence that surrounds rape, which serves to stigmatise and marginalise victims, thereby silencing their experiences and perpetuating their suffering.

Methodology

The chosen research design is content analysis, specifically close reading and thematic analysis of *Kintu*. This approach entails systematically examining the text to identify patterns, themes, and underlying meanings related to instances of sexual abuse and the culture of stigmatisation of sexually abused women portrayed in the novel. The research design is well-suited for exploring the research questions as it allows for an in-depth examination of the text and its portrayal of sexual abuse and stigma. Close reading enables researchers to delve into the nuances of the narrative while thematic analysis helps identify common themes and patterns across the text. This approach provides rich insights into the cultural dynamics and societal attitudes depicted in the novel, offering a nuanced understanding of how sexual abuse and stigma are represented and perpetuated within the fictional world of *Kintu*.

Findings and Discussion of Findings

Kintu by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi delves into the complex and interwoven narratives of Ugandan families across generations, where instances of sexual abuse are depicted with profound sensitivity and depth. One such instance revolves around the character of Nnamata, who grapples with the trauma of being raped by Mr. Kintu, resulting in the birth of her son, Isaac. The novel explores the ramifications of this abuse, not only on Nnamata but also on subsequent generations, highlighting the enduring impact of such violence within familial and societal contexts.



Research Question 1: How does Jennifer Nansubuga's Makumbi's novel *Kintu* portray the culture of silence and stigma surrounding rape through selected characters in the novel?

Kintu delves deeply into the multifaceted impact of sexual abuse and stigmatisation on its characters, unraveling themes of trauma, guilt, and resilience. Through characters like Nnamata, who grapples with the aftermath of her assault and the subsequent birth of her son, Isaac, the novel explores the enduring trauma inflicted by sexual violence. Nnamata's internal conflict reflects the pervasive sense of guilt and shame often experienced by survivors, as she wrestles with feelings of responsibility for her son's plight and struggles to reconcile her past with her present; despite the weight of her trauma, Nnamata demonstrates remarkable resilience, driven by her determination to seek redemption and confront the silence surrounding her abuse. There are other instances of recurring themes such as trauma, guilt, and resilience on page 271.

...Then one thing became clearer. She was to blame for Isaac
having a mentally ill father. Isaac will hate her more. It was not
Like Mr. Kintu had killed her: was she the first woman to be forced?
Mr. Kintu's family would be hostile after what she did to him.

Also, Nnamata's experience of sexual abuse at the hands of Mr. Kintu deeply scars her, leaving a lasting emotional and psychological impact. Her internal struggles and unresolved trauma are evident in her reluctance to confront Mr. Kintu and her ongoing battle with shame and guilt. Nnamata grapples with overwhelming guilt over her son Isaac's suffering, feeling responsible for the circumstances of his birth and upbringing. This guilt drives her to seek redemption through her quest to find Mr. Kintu and reveal the truth about his parentage. In the text on page 239,

"Nnamata's father did not buy Nnamata's
story of rape. If he raped you why didn't
you tell us" .

Also, on Page 275, Mr. Kintu demonstrates his guilt of assaulting Nnamata when Isaac is discussing with him by running away. Despite the trauma and guilt she carries, Nnamata demonstrates remarkable resilience in her determination to confront her past and seek justice for herself and her son. Her refusal to be defined by her ordeal and her unwavering pursuit of truth showcase her resilience in the face of adversity.

Throughout *Kintu*, the culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse is depicted through recurring motifs and symbols. The character of Mr. Kintu, whose mental illness and past actions embody the consequences of societal silence, serves as a poignant symbol of the collective denial and complicity that perpetuates stigma. His erratic behaviour and his refusal to acknowledge his son, Isaac, reflect the broader reluctance to confront the truth of sexual violence, opting for avoidance and denial. Similarly, the motif of secrecy and hidden truths underscores the pervasive nature of stigma, as characters such as Nnamata grapple with the burden of untold stories and unspoken truths. The motif of secrecy pervades the novel, highlighting the culture of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse. Characters such as Nnamata carry the burden of untold stories and unspoken truths, perpetuating the cycle of shame and denial that surrounds their experiences.

*"Nnamata did not know what to feel about
the news that Mr. Kintu was mentally unwell"*

The exploration of themes related to sexual abuse and stigmatisation in *Kintu* enriches the larger narrative of the novel, offering a nuanced examination of personal and societal dynamics. By weaving together individual experiences with broader cultural attitudes, the novel illuminates the interconnectedness of trauma, guilt, and resilience in shaping identity and relationships. Through characters such as Nnamata and Mr. Kintu, the novel challenges readers to confront the consequences of silence and stigma, inviting reflection on the complexities of power, agency, and redemption. Ultimately, *Kintu* invites readers to reckon with the enduring legacy of sexual violence and the transformative potential of confronting its pervasive silence.

In *Kintu*, the narrative reflects complex cultural attitudes towards sexual abuse, particularly regarding the stigma and silence surrounding the issue. The character of Nnamata grapples with the aftermath of



being sexually assaulted by Mr. Kintu, torn between shame, guilt, and the desire for retribution or reconciliation. This internal conflict mirrors the struggles faced by many survivors of sexual abuse in real-world contexts, where societal norms often dictate silence and victim-blaming.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Mr. Kintu's mental illness adds another layer to the cultural perception of sexual abuse. His descent into insanity is both a consequence and a shield against accountability for his actions. This reflects how mental health issues can intersect with cultural perceptions of culpability, complicating the discourse surrounding sexual violence. *Kintu* intricately explores the themes of stigma and silence surrounding sexual abuse, depicting both universal and culturally specific manifestations of these phenomena. Across cultures, survivors often face stigma and are silenced by societal pressures, fear of retribution, or lack of support systems. In *Kintu*, Nnamata's reluctance to confront Mr. Kintu and disclose his identity to Isaac exemplifies the pervasive silence that surrounds sexual abuse.

Moreover, *Kintu* underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing the intersecting factors that perpetuate stigma and silence, including mental health stigma, patriarchal structures, and societal expectations. By confronting these issues head-on, the novel encourages dialogue and advocacy for survivors' rights and mental health support systems. Therefore, *Kintu* contributes to a deeper understanding of sexual abuse and its cultural ramifications, challenging readers to confront uncomfortable truths and advocate for change within their own communities.

Research Question 2: What specific literary techniques and devices are used in *Kintu* to portray the culture of silence and stigma around sexual abuse?

In Jennifer Nansubuga's Makunmbi's (2020) *Kintu*, the author uses imagery to make comparison in the novel. On Page 120, the novel uses the statement "You led those men to their slaughter" to describe the process of breaking down the barriers that prevent people from speaking out about sexual abuse. This statement is used to show how the community can begin to heal and move forward by creating an environment where victims feel safe to speak out. The author uses this statement to highlight the importance of empowering victims and giving them a voice. This statement is also used to show how the cycle of silence can be broken by creating a culture of support and understanding.

Jennifer Nansubuga's Makunmbi's *Kintu* uses vivid language when describing the rape of a girl named Suubi on Page 119. Vivid language is used to avoid explicitly describing the violence of the act, and instead focus on the impact that it has on the girl. The novel points to the emotional and psychological damage that sexual violence can cause. Additionally, throughout the novel there is a sense of unease and tension that is present throughout the story. These distance readers from the harsh reality of the act, and make it easier to ignore the issue. Mr. Kintu's mental illness serves as a metaphor for the collective denial and silence surrounding sexual abuse within the community. His erratic behaviour and his refusal to acknowledge his past crimes reflect society's reluctance to confront the truth and break the silence surrounding sexual violence.

"... Mr. Kintu had been in and out of the hospital until 1985" (Page 272)

The writer uses personification to give non-human objects or concepts human characteristics. This use of personification adds emotional weight to the text, and helps to create a sense of the characters' connection to the land. Additionally, it highlights the ways in which the land itself is affected by the violence and trauma of the characters' experiences. The personification of the Ugandan landscape is a key example of the author's use of literary techniques to highlight the novel's themes of violence and trauma. The author uses personification to show how the characters' experiences and actions affect not only themselves, but also the land on which they live. This personification creates a sense of the land as a living, breathing entity that is impacted by the actions of the characters. It also creates a sense of connection between the characters and the land, highlighting the novel's theme of the importance of place and identity.

On Page 12, the author describes the Ugandan landscape as

*"the hardening of the ground, the yellowing
sparseness and thinning of vegetation indicated
that they were moving further away from
fertile land towards a more arid landscape"*



This personification creates a sense of the land as a sick and tormented entity, mirroring the suffering and trauma experienced by the characters in the novel. The author's use of personification in this passage highlights the connection between the characters and the land, and emphasises the impact of the characters' experiences on the landscape. Additionally, the author's use of personification in this passage helps to create a sense of hope, as the land is "trying to wake from its nightmare."

In relation to the findings regarding earlier reviewed literature in the introduction, the effect of sexual abuse on survivors is philosophical, long-lasting, emotional, and social consequences, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and isolation.

Conclusion

The exploration of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse, as depicted in *Kintu*, unveils a complex web of emotions and societal dynamics. However, Nnamata's journey to confront Mr. Kintu in the narrative exposes the profound effect of distress and shame on other characters. Isaac's struggle to reconcile with his father's legacy amidst his son's illness further highlights the intergenerational repercussions of sexual violence. These insights shed light on the nuanced ways in which silence perpetuates cycles of suffering and alienation within communities.

The narrative underscores the urgent need to challenge prevailing norms of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse. Nnamata's initial reluctance to confront Mr. Kintu mirrors society's tendency to suppress uncomfortable truths, perpetuating a culture of shame and secrecy. However, her eventual decision to confront the past reflects the transformative power of speaking out and seeking justice. Similarly, Isaac's internal struggle highlights the psychological toll of societal expectations and the importance of fostering environments of empathy and support for survivors.

The narrative of *Kintu* serves as a microcosm of broader societal challenges surrounding sexual abuse and stigma. By examining the intersections of gender, mental health, and familial dynamics, the story illuminates the multifaceted nature of trauma and resilience. These insights have far-reaching implications for policymakers, educators, and community leaders seeking to address these issues effectively. By amplifying survivors' voices, challenging harmful stereotypes, and promoting trauma-informed approaches, societies can foster cultures of healing and empowerment, ultimately breaking the cycle of silence and stigma surrounding sexual abuse.

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