# AWKA JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERARY STUDIES (AJELLS)

**Volume 12 Number 3**
**September, 2025**

# Moral Depravity: A Study of Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path*

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## Abstract

This study examines the theme of moral depravity in Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path*, a Nigerian novel that addresses issues of silence, betrayal, and patriarchal complicity in the perpetuation of sexual abuse. The central objective is to critically assess how Kilanko unveils moral corruption through the framework of African feminist theory. Building on the insights of African feminist thinkers such as Molara Ogundipe, Helen Chukwuma, Flora Nwapa, and Obioma Nnaemeka, the study applies feminist literary analysis to examine the roles of patriarchy, cultural taboos, and communal denial in enabling abuse. The analysis demonstrates that Kilanko depicts moral depravity not simply as individual moral failure but as a structural crisis rooted in familial, cultural, and communal systems. Morayo's story as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse underscores the intersections of trauma, secrecy, and female resilience. The study contends that *Daughters Who Walk This Path* functions as both a searing critique of patriarchal oppression and a feminist vision that emphasizes the redemptive power of women's voices, self-definition, and solidarity in advancing healing, justice, and cultural transformation.

**Keywords:** African Feminism, Moral Depravity, Incest, Silence, Patriarchy, Trauma

## Introduction

Literature is often described as a mirror of society, it reflects both its strengths and weaknesses. In Africa, literature particularly women's writing has long served as a powerful tool for exposing hidden injustices and questioning oppressive cultural norms. From pioneering voices like Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo, who are regarded as the mother of modern African women's writing, to Buchi Emecheta (1979), whose novels questioned marriage and motherhood in patriarchal contexts, and down to contemporary figures like Adichie (2014) and Kilanko (2012), African women have consistently challenged the silences surrounding women's experiences. Their works highlight the everyday realities of oppression, sexual violence, betrayal, marginalization, and the resilience of women.

Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* contributes strictly to this tradition of feminist intervention in African literature. On the surface, it tells the coming-of-age story of Morayo, a Nigerian girl whose innocence is stolen through childhood sexual abuse. Yet beyond this personal tragedy, Kilanko's narrative exposes the wider cultural and moral failures that enable such abuse. The novel demonstrates how silence, complicity, and patriarchal authority combine to normalize violence while suppressing the voices of victims. In doing so, it portrays moral depravity not merely as an isolated act of individual misconduct but as a communal failure that reflects the collapse of cultural ethics and social responsibility. This paper examines the theme of moral depravity in *Daughters Who Walk This Path* through the lens of African Feminist Theory. The aim is to show how Kilanko uses Morayo's story to critique patriarchal structures, exposes the dangers of cultural silence, and emphasize the transformative power of female voice and agency. The study argues that the novel functions both as a social critique

and as a feminist call to action. It challenges readers to confront systemic moral corruption and to promote cultural renewal rooted in compassion, inclusion, and justice.

In a world marked by suppression, exploitation, and depression where patriarchy dominates and women are often regarded as second-class citizens, certain fundamental rights and privileges are consistently denied to women and girls. These include the right to bodily autonomy, access to quality education, freedom from early and forced marriage, inheritance and property rights, equal employment opportunities, and protection from gender-based violence. Women are also frequently excluded from political representation and decision-making processes, confined by cultural expectations that privilege men's voices and authority over theirs. This reality contradicts the biblical and moral truth that God, in His infinite wisdom, created both man and woman in His image, equal in dignity and worth. Why then does this unjust segregation and denial of rights persist?

Therefore, what this paper ultimately argues is not a struggle for sameness or a competition with men, but the recognition and restoration of women's rightful place in the society. It emphasizes the need to grant women equal dignity, opportunities, and protection from moral corruption. Kilanko's narrative becomes an urgent reminder that healing and social progress can only occur when societies confront patriarchal oppression, reject the culture of silence, and embrace justice that includes and uplifts women.

**Theoretical Framework**

African Feminist Theory provides the essential basis for this study. Unlike Western feminism, whose concept focuses primarily on gender, African feminism situates women's struggles within specific cultural, historical, and social realities. Simply put, African Feminist Theory does not seek equality with men, they

seek that the rights of women should be given to them but in the Western world, they want to be in equality with men.

African Feminist Theory acknowledges the intersections of patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, and community values in shaping African women's experiences. Scholars such as Ogundipe, Chukwuma, Nwapa, and Nnaemeka offer insights that clarify both the oppressions women face and the strategies of resistance they employ. Ogundipe's concept of STIWA (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) stresses that African societies remain incomplete if women's voices and experiences are excluded. For Ogundipe, the true test of a community's morality is how it protects its most vulnerable members especially women and children. Silence in the face of abuse therefore represents not just individual failure but cultural deficiency. Her concept vividly is a call to action for women's inclusiveness.

Chukwuma's conception is the idea of "woman's positiveness", which emphasizes how African women in literature often move from silence and invisibility toward self-assertion and voice. This framework is crucial for understanding Morayo's transformation in Kilanko's novel, her initial silence is not a sign of weakness but an effect of gender conditioning. While at her final resolution becomes an act of feminist resistance.

Nwapa, often described as the mother of modern African women's writing, insists that women must substantiate themselves rather than accept identities imposed upon them by Androcentric society. This idea clarifies the essence of Morayo's redefining of herself, not merely as a victim but as a survivor who reclaims agency and dignity.

Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism (the feminism of negotiation and give-and-take) adds another dimension, stressing that African women often resist patriarchy through strategic negotiation,

survival, and resilience rather than open confrontation. Morayo's gradual assertion of her voice reflects this form of resistance. She navigates silence, trauma, and fear before finally reclaiming her narrative. Together, these African feminist perspectives provide the tools for analyzing how *Daughters Who Walk This Path* dramatizes moral depravity as both a personal and collective failure while also offering a vision of feminist renewal through voice, resilience, and cultural transformation.

**Moral Depravity in *Daughters who Walk this Path***

Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* is more than a story about the childhood of Morayo; it is a bold evaluation of silence, betrayal, and the complicity of patriarchal culture in sustaining abuse. The novel dramatizes how moral depravity, incest, silence, and complicity becomes systemic, when societies abandon their ethical commitment to protect women and children. Through African feminist lenses, Kilanko's narrative is revealed not just as a story of individual trauma, but as a broader critique of cultural practices and patriarchal ideologies leading to the marginalization and undervaluation of women's contribution and experiences while shielding men from accountability.

**Incest and Familial Betrayal**

One of the most striking ways moral depravity is dramatized in Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* is through the theme of incest. The abuse that Morayo suffers at the hands of her cousin, Bros T, not only represents a personal violation but also exposes the collapse of the family's moral responsibility. In African societies, the family has traditionally been regarded as the custodian of morality, a sacred institution entrusted with the upbringing and protection of children. Yet in Kilanko's novel, this very institution is corrupted, becoming the site where innocence and silence is exploited.

From an African Feminist perspective, Bros T's abuse of Morayo embodies the betrayal of kinship obligations. As Ogundipe (1994)

explains in her STIWA framework, no society can claim completeness or moral health when its women and children are excluded from protection and dignity. By exploiting his authority as an older male relative, Bros T not only violates Morayo's body but also destroys the trust that family bonds are meant to safeguard. His predation is therefore more than a private act of immorality; it is a symbol of the wider cultural failure of patriarchal societies that privilege male authority at the expense of women's safety.

Furthermore, the betrayal is intensified by the silence that follows the abuse. Chukwuma (1990) in her concept "woman's positiveness" provides a useful framework here. Chukwuma notes that female characters in African literature often begin from positions of silence and invisibility before they gradually assert their voices. Morayo's initial muteness after Bros T's assault is not simply the helplessness of a child; it reflects a cultural system in which women and girls are conditioned to protect men's reputations, even at the cost of their own dignity. In this sense, Bros T's depravity lies not only in the physical act of abuse but also in the way patriarchal culture shields him from accountability. This resonates with Nnaemeka's idea of Nego-Feminism (2004), which emphasizes that African women often resist patriarchy through negotiation, survival, and gradual assertion rather than open rebellion. Morayo's silence after the abuse can be read as a form of negotiation, a survival tactic in a context where speaking out would mean shaming her family and possibly facing disbelief or further harm. However, Nnaemeka also insists that negotiation is not surrender but a subtle line of resistance.

In Morayo's case, her silence is painful but prepares her for the time when she finally learns to speak for herself, showing that even within oppressive structures, women navigate ways of survival until they can claim their voices. Nwapa's insistence on self-definition (2007) adds another dimension to this analysis.

Nwapa argues that African women must reject imposed identities and define themselves on their own terms. Morayo, at first, is defined by shame and victimhood imposed upon her by her abuser and her culture of silence. Yet, Kilanko does not allow her story to remain fixed in that state. As the novel progresses, Morayo begins to redefine herself, not as a silenced child but as a survivor whose voice matters. In this way, the novel dramatizes Nwapa's vision of women moving beyond sufferance to active self-representation.

Thus, incest in *Daughters Who Walk This Path* is not treated merely as an individual tragedy. It becomes an allegory for the wider moral corruption of a society that betrays its most vulnerable members while privileging patriarchal authority. The family, which should function as a protective space, collapses into a site of violence and silence. African Feminist Theory helps us see that the true depravity here lies not only in Bros T's predation but in the cultural structures that allow him to act with impunity. Kilanko's novel therefore uses Morayo's abuse to indict both the family as a failed moral institution and the larger patriarchal order that sustains such betrayal.

**Silence, Complicity and Patriarchal Cover-Up**

In *Daughters Who Walk This Path*, Kilanko shows that silence can be very harmful, it is not just about "not talking", it is shown as a way to control people especially women. Silence works as a hidden tool for male dominance, a tool of oppression deeply embedded within patriarchal system. After Morayo's abuse by Bros T, she is forced into silence not because she lacks words, but because the cultural environment makes speaking out an impossible act. Silence, in this sense, is not chosen but imposed, maintained by families and communities who prioritize reputation and male authority over justice and healing.

From an African Feminist perspective, silence operates as a form of complicity. Ogundipe (1994) explains in her STIWA framework

that societies that exclude women's voices remain incomplete and morally deficient. In Kilanko's novel, the family and the wider community embodied this incompleteness. Instead of protecting Morayo, they insist on silence to preserve social order. This reflects a culture where female suffering is normalized while male perpetrators are shielded from accountability. By dramatizing this cover-up, Kilanko exposes how patriarchal societies systematically sacrificed the vulnerable to maintain appearances.

Chukwuma (1990) further illuminates this theme with her theory of "woman's positiveness." Chukwuma argues that women's silence in African literature is often symbolic of cultural suppression rather than personal weakness. Morayo's muteness after the abuse must therefore be understood as the weight of patriarchal culture pressing upon her. She does not speak because her society has trained her to protect male figures, even when they are guilty of moral crimes. This "trained silence" becomes a moral indictment of both the family and the community, who knowingly abandon their duty to defend the innocent.

Flora Nwapa's feminist vision is equally relevant here. Nwapa (2007) insists that African women must move beyond identities imposed by patriarchal structures and embrace self-definition. Silence, as portrayed in Kilanko's novel, is the very mechanism by which patriarchy robs women of the right to self-definition. For Morayo, silence means being trapped in a narrative of shame that her abuser and her community have written for her. It is only when she begins to break this silence first within herself, and later through her testimony that she reclaims her voice as a tool of identity and resistance. Thus, Nwapa's call for self-definition finds powerful resonance in Morayo's eventual decision to tell her story.
The cultural cover-up in the novel is also a form of moral depravity. Patriarchal societies often protect perpetrators in order to safeguard male privilege and family honour. This phenomenon is not unique to Kilanko's fictional narrative; rather, it reflects a

broader reality long identified by African Feminist Scholars, who argue that cultural taboos and communal denial often conspire to silence victims of sexual violence.

Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism (2004) helps to explain this dynamic. According to Nnaemeka, African women often navigate systems of silence and complicity by finding subtle ways to resist, through negotiation, endurance, and eventual assertion. Morayo embodies this negotiation: she initially remains quiet because the weight of culture leaves her with no alternative, but her silence does not mean defeat. It is a temporary survival strategy that prepares the ground for her eventual voice, which destabilizes the culture of complicity.

By choosing to narrate her story, Morayo enacts a feminist disruption of patriarchal consensus. She refuses to allow silence to serve as a cloak for moral depravity. She speaks out, breaking silence and fights male control. This act of speaking is both therapeutic and revolutionary. On a personal level, it allows her to heal from trauma; on a cultural level, it challenges the very structures that uphold silence. As Ogundipe (1994) argues, societies can only be whole when women's voices are included in their moral and social fabric. Morayo's testimony, therefore, represents a demand for wholeness, a call for a society where truth replaces secrecy, and justice replaces complicity.

Ultimately, Kilanko's narrative demonstrates that silence is not merely the absence of speech but an active tool of oppression. Complicity, whether by families, communities, or institutions, becomes a second form of violence against victims, deepening their trauma and reinforcing moral corruption. By dramatizing how silence and cover-up sustain patriarchal authority, *Daughters Who Walk This Path* exposes the systemic nature of moral depravity and affirms the African Feminist call for resistance, self-definition, and collective reform.

**Trauma, Identity and the Weight of Silence**

Trauma in Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* is presented as a wide experience. It includes personal pain, social rejection, and cultural pressure. Through Morayo's journey, Kilanko demonstrates that trauma is compounded when societies fail to acknowledge or address abuse. Instead of being healed within her family and community, Morayo is left to carry the invisible burden of silence, shame, and betrayal. In this way, trauma becomes not just a personal scar but a mirror reflecting a society's moral collapse.

African Feminist Scholars have long observed that the trauma of African women is often twofold. First, women endure the immediate violence itself - in Morayo's case, sexual abuse at the hand of Bros T. Second, they are subjected to cultural neglect, silence, and stigmatization that follow such abuse. Chukwuma (1990) explains that women's suffering in patriarchal societies is magnified by the deliberate suppression of their voices. This theoretical lens helps to interpret Morayo's silence after the abuse not simply as a sign of fragility but as a direct consequence of systemic neglect. She is silenced not because she lacks the will to speak, but because the patriarchal community denies her the space, legitimacy, and protection to do so.

This weight of silence deeply shaped Morayo's identity. Initially, she internalizes shame, seeing herself through the distorted lens of cultural judgment rather than the truth. In many patriarchal contexts, female victims of sexual violence are made to believe that they carry the stain of the act, while the male perpetrator remains untarnished. Kilanko highlights this injustice by showing how Bros T, despite his moral depravity, remains protected by the community's silence, while Morayo is left to bear the emotional and psychological aftermath. This inversion of guilt is not accidental; it is a deliberate product of a system that privileges male authority and discredits female pain.

Nwapa's call for self-definition becomes critical at this point. Nwapa (2007) insists that women must break free from patriarchal narratives that define them as victims, dependents, or "bearers of shame." For Morayo, trauma initially positions her in that imposed role of silence and shame, but as the narrative progresses, she learns to redefine herself not as an object of abuse, but as a subject with a voice, agency, and dignity. Trauma, in this sense, becomes contradictory: it is a destructive force yet it produces resilience and self-discovery.

Ogundipe's STIWA framework (1994) also sheds light on the collective dimension of Morayo's trauma. Ogundipe argues that African societies remain incomplete and morally compromised when they exclude women's experiences from social justice. Morayo's suffering, therefore, is not merely her own; it is a symptom of a broader societal disease, a failure of the family and community to uphold their duty of care. Her trauma reflects the corruption of kinship, where those entrusted to protect children become perpetrators or enablers of harm. By situating trauma in this cultural framework, Kilanko demonstrates that abuse is not only an individual act of violence but also a systemic betrayal.

Furthermore, Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism (2004) highlights the strategies of resilience embedded in Morayo's journey. Nnaemeka explains that African women often resist oppression not solely through outright rebellion but through negotiation, survival, and subtle acts of assertion. Morayo's gradual movement from silence to voice mirrors this feminist negotiation. She survives the initial trauma by enduring in silence, but this silence is not permanent defeat, it is a temporary strategy. Over time, she learns to draw strength from solidarity with other women, particularly through conversations and relationships that validate her pain and encourage her to speak. Her eventual testimony constitutes the ultimate expression conditioned by traumatic experience.

The weight of silence in the novel highlight how trauma continues across generations, shaping both those who suffer directly and those who come after them. Kilanko portrays how unspoken abuse festers within families and communities, leaving invisible scars that shape identity overtime. By silencing victims, communities not only fail them in the present but also risk perpetuating cycles of abuse for future generations. In this sense, Morayo's eventual choice to tell her story is not only an act of personal healing but also a generational intervention, a refusal to allow silence to become her inheritance or that of others.

Ultimately, trauma in *Daughters Who Walk This Path* functions as both a revelation and a challenge. It reveals the moral bankruptcy of a society that protects abusers while isolating victims. At the same time, it challenges women like Morayo to reclaim their identities and voices in defiance of cultural expectations. Kilanko's narrative insists that while trauma marks the human soul with pain, it can also forge resilience and renewal when victims refuse silence and embrace self-definition. Through this lens, Morayo's journey reflects not only her individual struggle but also the broader African Feminist vision of transformation, a movement from silence to speech, from shame to dignity, and from victimhood to agency.

**Feminist Resistance, Voice, and Renewal**

If trauma and silence represent the destructive weight of patriarchy in Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path*, resistance and renewal embody the novel's feminist response. Kilanko does not allow Morayo's story to end in despair. Instead, she carefully charts a journey from brokenness to resilience, showing how voice becomes the most powerful weapon against moral depravity. Through the lens of African Feminist Theory, Morayo's transformation from silence to speech is revealed as both personal survival and collective resistance.

Chukwuma's concept of "woman's positiveness" (1990) is central to this reading. Chukwuma argues that African women in literature often begin from silence and invisibility, but gradually emerge as stronger, assertive subjects. Morayo's journey reflects this pattern: she begins as a silenced victim, weighed down by shame, secrecy, and betrayal, but grows into a woman who refuses to remain defined by her trauma. Her decision to speak out is not accidental; it is a deliberate feminist strategy that aligns with Chukwuma's vision of women breaking free from silence to assert their truth.
Nwapa's insistence on women's self-definition (2007) also resonates with Morayo's journey. At the initial stage in the novel, Morayo is perceived by herself and others only through the lens of victimhood. Yet, by telling her story, she reclaims the right to define herself not as a broken child but as a survivor with dignity and agency. In this act, she refuses to let patriarchal culture to impose a permanent identity of shame upon her. Kilanko dramatizes this transformation to emphasize that renewal for African women begins with rejecting externally imposed labels and asserting selfhood on their own terms.

Equally significant is Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism (2004), which highlights how African women resist not always through outright confrontation but through strategies of negotiation, endurance, and survival. Morayo's resistance follows this model. Her silence, initially imposed, later becomes part of her gradual negotiation of survival. By the time she chooses to speak, she has gained strength through solidarity with other women, showing that her resistance is collective rather than solitary. In Nnaemeka's terms, her voice becomes a strategic act, timed, deliberate, and ultimately transformative.

Ogundipe's STIWA framework (1994) further reinforces the broader implications of Morayo's resistance. For Ogundipe, the inclusion of women's voices and experiences in social transformation is not optional but essential. Morayo's eventual

testimony, therefore, is not merely personal healing but a symbolic indictment of the society that failed her. Her voice becomes a call for moral renewal, reminding readers that no African society can claim wholeness if women and children are denied protection, justice, and recognition. In this sense, Morayo's renewal is collective, it carries implications for family structures, cultural attitudes, and the very moral fabric of the nation.

By centering Morayo's resistance, Kilanko presents *Daughters Who Walk This Path* as more than a tale of trauma. It is a feminist declaration that silence can no longer serve as a cloak for injustice. The novel affirms that while silence destroys, voice restores; while complicity breeds decay, truth-telling creates the possibility of renewal. Kilanko's narrative embodies the African Feminist conviction that women's resilience is not only survival but a pathway to transforming their societies.

**Conclusion**

Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* is not merely a story of childhood trauma; it is a profound moral and feminist critique of Nigerian society. By centering Morayo's journey, the novel exposes how incest, silence, and complicity reveal the deep moral depravity that results when families and communities abandon their duty of care. Through African Feminist Theory, the text demonstrates that the harm suffered by women and children is not only personal but collective, rooted in patriarchal structures that privilege male authority and silence female voices.

Critics such as Chukwuma, Nwapa, Ogundipe, and Nnaemeka provide useful frameworks for understanding Morayo's story. Chukwuma's "woman's positiveness" explains her journey from silence to voice; Nwapa's call for women's self-definition clarifies her refusal to remain trapped in victimhood; Ogundipe's STIWA framework highlights the social significance of her testimony; and Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism reveals the strategies of survival and

negotiation embedded in her resistance. Together, these perspectives affirm that Morayo's resilience is not an isolated act but part of a larger feminist struggle for dignity, justice, and renewal.

Ultimately, Kilanko offers her readers more than a narrative of suffering. She presents a moral challenge to reject cultures of silence, confront patriarchal corruption, and create safe spaces for women and children. In doing so, *Daughters Who Walk This Path* becomes both art and activism, it is not just a story for entertainment (art), but also a tool for social change (activism). It is a story that insists on truth, voice, and transformation. It reminds us that moral depravity is not destiny but a condition that can be resisted, and that true social progress in Africa depends on listening to women's voices and including them fully in the work of cultural renewal.

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