

Incest and its Effects on the Female Self in Muthoni Garland's *Tracking the Scent of My Mother*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 09 Oct 2024 Revised on: 06 Nov 2024 Accepted on: 13 Nov 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— incest, sexual, violation, defilement, molestation.</p>	<p><i>Muthoni Garland's Tracking the Scent of My Mother is a novella that portrays incest as a form of sexual violation. This paper is a close reading of Garland's Tracking the Scent of My Mother. Besides close reading, textual reading has been used to offer a critical appreciation of the text and to interrogate the connotations of the language used explicitly and implicitly in the text. Tracking the Scent of My Mother can be classified as feminist literature and hence read from a feminist eye. The theoretical approach used in this paper is feminist theoretical criticism. Feminist theoretical criticism is concerned with the woman as the 'other' and aims at assigning 'self' to the woman. The descriptions of the female self that is produced in this text is part of the context in which women live. Since this novella is narrated from a feminist eye, it provides a female's perspective on incest as a form of sexual assault and its effects on the victim.</i></p>

Tracking the Scent of My Mother is set in the countryside which is patriarchal in nature. Scholastica is the protagonist. The narrative opens with background information on her parents. She says, "My father wooed my mother in a 1200 Datsun pick-up [which was] sold so soon afterwards that it must have felt to her like a false promise" (6). By focusing on the Scholastica's parents' courtship, Garland outlines the moment that women exercise the greatest power. Mary Poovey observes:

...the myth of romantic love tends to freeze the relationship between a man and a woman at its moment of greatest intensity... when women seem to exercise their greatest power, romantic love seems to promise to women an emotional intensity that ideally compensates for all the practical opportunities they are denied. (53)

Women are viewed as exercising power over men only at the time of courtship. Scholastica's father is aware of the authority a maiden woman holds and hence woos her by using his 1200 Datsun pick-up as a symbol of his potential riches. He sells it as soon as he marries her. Patriarchal society views woman as the 'other' and she only comes close to finding her self when a man comes by to ask for her hand in marriage. It is, therefore, difficult for women to "achieve anything like full 'femininity'....become solid defenders of the patriarchal status quo" (Moi 64). Thus, given an opportunity, they adopt strategies to counter patriarchy.

Scholastica's mother rebels against patriarchy when she runs away from her domineering husband and an abusive marriage. She leaves Scholastica with her father who rapes her. Muthoni Garland uses writing as a mode to express, define and explain incest as a form of sexual violation. She attempts to claim textual autonomy to affirm her right to narrate incest, a taboo

subject. The rural society in which she bases the narrative is silent on incest as a form of sexual defilement. Through writing, the author validates and legitimizes discussions of the victim's experience of incest.

Scholastica is the narrating 'I' who is also a character in this novella. When she is raped, the narrative account of her rape ordeal becomes a record of women's struggles to overcome the silence of women who are violated. Sielke states that "sexual violence has always been a central issue of feminist debate" (12). As a character, Scholastica gives details of her rape scene using figurative language. She says "I was hoeing my father's fields one dusty afternoon...when my father came to work his *jembe*. He hammered it into me, then twisted and turned over my ground" (31-32). The author uses metaphorical language to refer to the rape ordeal. She uses the word 'jembe,' a hoe, in reference to her father's penis while 'ground' stands for her genitalia. The experience makes Scholastica to momentarily lose her memory. She reckons:

Roaring in my ears. The stink of snuff. Talons ripping through me. Still, it did not end. Roaring. Ripping. Heat. Where is my mother? Only when I opened my eyes to the shape of the clouds did I scream [.] *Irimu ria Nyakondo*, the ogre who eats children was mocking me from up high. (32)

Scholastica's mother has run away from her matrimonial home. She has left Scholastica under the care of her father. In the absence of his wife, he devours their daughter and hence the metaphorical reference to him as a monster that eats up children instead of protecting them.

When Scholastica regains her composure, she goes home and does not share the ordeal with the rest of her family members. She says, "Shivering, I staggered to the compound. On the way the twins [her step sisters] glared at me like I was faking pain to get from digging, and my brother sniggered at my torn and strained dress. But my senior-mother smelled the air and hammered my father's wooden door. He ignored her" (32). Her step sisters do not understand what she has been subjected to. They think she is feigning pain as an excuse to stop working on the farm. The snigger from her brother is equally regrettable. He does not

fathom that his sister has been raped by their father. However, the senior mother realises that her step daughter has been sexually molested by her own father and tries to reach out to him for an explanation without success.

Unfortunately, just like the victim, the senior mother resorts to silence amidst her cries of disappointment: "Yesu Christo! Senior mother beat her head against the door" (32). Her failure to play an active role to pursue the male perpetrator of incest denotes the resigned attitude on the part of women who are unable to raise a finger against female subjugation. Furthermore, the duties and obligations of paternal authority; the responsibility to provide for the needs of the family; and to also protect the family members are in question. The narrator's father fails in his duties when he turns on his daughter and sexually abuses her. The senior mother's exclamation "My house is falling!" (32), is an outcry of a woman whose husband has failed in his responsibility. He not only destroys the family's reputation, but also that of the entire community.

Scholastica's moral purity is defiled, but she is unable to break away from a father who binds both her body and soul. Instead, she blackmails him into educating her by extending more sexual favours to him. This is in the hope of realising her potential and growth of herself. Using sex as a weapon to acquire education underscores Scholastica's disposition to exploit sexual relations to empower herself. Unfortunately, she drops out of school to deliver her father's baby. Her uncle bemoans her fate: "What a waste of high quality brain matter" (38). To salvage her education, he sends Scholastica and her child to a mission centre.

The senior-mother "[flusters] wings to spread the gossip" (37) about the incestuous relationship between Scholastica and her father. Her fellow Christians, who the author ironically refers as "her disciples [.] spread the Word and it [multiplies]" (37). The Biblical allusion to rumours as the 'Word' of God is a confirmation of the shallow nature of the Christianity the senior mother and her friends practice. They fail to give guidance and it takes the elders, the chief, sub-chief and the policemen to arbitrate over the matter. Unfortunately, Scholastica refuses to talk. She ponders:

I could deal with my father's renunciation of me, his swearing with forefinger pointed up to God he now reclaimed, as though the incestuous devils had only plagued me.... I could deal with being thrown out of home with my blank-face daughter as though the sight reminded them of their own vulnerability. I could stomach the spitting and hissing at the market.... (37)

She takes responsibility for her actions while her father denies everything in self-defence. Surprisingly, she is happy that the child "[brings] back the scent of [her] mother with such intensity that [she] sometimes [faints] with gratitude and yearning" (38). Strangely enough, the child reminds her of her mother and she is ready to bear anything for the sake of her child whom, she concedes, is a replica of her own mother.

From the incestuous relationship, Scholastica bears a daughter who is retarded and she reckons that it is not surprising "being that she [is] my father's" (37). The child, a female, who is haunted by non-identity; no name is assigned to her. She is merely referred to as 'my daughter' and hence Scholastica takes up the onerous task of making herself and her daughter visible. Female invisibility is depicted as a challenge in this community. Uncle Erasmus is singled out as a man who ventures out to empower women through education. He takes Scholastica and her child to a mission centre where there are "so many teenage fruits of incest, homelessness, and murder" (38). This is an indictment of a society which seems subdued by immorality. The narrator's quest for education is met to some extent for she manages to complete her secondary education, learns how to sew and bake. Later, through the help of a fund raiser, she enrolls in a teachers' training college and puts her mentally challenged daughter in a boarding school.

Garland uses the love relationship between Scholastica and the Luo man to represent the effect of rape on the self identity of Scholastica. He sympathises with her troubled milieu after she confesses "the bitter portions of [her] background" (40). It is surprising that the author describes Scholastica's boyfriend ethnically, but it is important to show that humanity transcends ethnic boundaries. The boyfriend points out that her "story [serves] as a tragic metaphor for Africa" (40). Scholastica's experience points at the troubles of women in a society

that physically and sexually violates them. Garland depicts the private and public realms of Scholastica that is interwoven through a narrative that examines an individual's contentious self. Consequently, when she misconceives that her lover has sexually abused her stunted child, she murders him in revenge. Her action can be traced to the trauma caused by the incestuous childhood experience which has become an appendage in her adulthood.

Scholastica's first and only pregnancy is from her father. When she decides to become pregnant again, she is unable to do so or her boyfriend fails to make it happen. The relationship between the two is constrained since both of them "... have not internalised the notion that a woman's self actualisation is not dependent on her biological role of reproduction...." (Achufusi, 101). Scholastica and her boyfriend are yet to ascend the ladder that currently governs relationships which perceive children as paramount in marriage. Her disenchantment with him is communicated as follows:

... my Luo man collected my daughter from school. When I arrived, my daughter was on his lap, his arms wrapped around her, her body jerking, her mouth gurgling at the ceiling. I smelled the Pilsner beer and sweat. I saw the bloody scratches on his face, neck and arms. I heard the Luo words he repeated over and over He sounded possessive. (41-42)

Scholastica is suspicious and misinterprets her lover's act of cuddling the child. The intensity of her annoyance with his perceived behaviour prompts her to murder him. Thus, she portrays her capacity for aggressive behaviour that exposes the turmoil and trauma that she lives with. As a woman, Scholastica has been sexually abused by her father, and has also been taken advantage of sexually by her mother's lovers and perhaps by her Luo boyfriend.

Scholastica seems to have a psychological problem which can be traced to incestuous experience in her childhood. She confirms this saying, " I scratch through the tracks in my mind to see where I stumbled, and try to differentiate what happened as a result of what was done to me and what happened as a result of my own shortcomings" (46). This denotes a reflective self who assumes part of the responsibility for her actions while at the same time attributing her

behaviour to other powers beyond her control. A flashback on the murders she commits confirms her warped female self. The narrator's life is compounded by the psychological suffering she experiences following the disappearance of her mother and subsequential rape by her father. This is exemplified by the murders she commits, but investigations do not yield the perpetrator because she stealthily covers all of them except the one of the lover. For instance, she kills her step sister, Faith, by pushing her into river Ragati because she spies on her when she is having sex with her brother. She inwardly takes pleasure when she is not apprehended for Faith's death. She lets us into her unspoken world:

I'd grip the rope with my hands; I'd dangle my feet on the edge, and dry in the sweet morning sun. On this same plank-and-rope bridge, two years later, I pushed my half-sister, Faith into Ragati's rushing waters; it was not my fault that she had never learnt to swim. (9)

When questioned by a policeman, her father, senior mother, chief or sub-chief, she feigns illness. After visiting the crime scene, testing the planks and the ropes of the bridge, studying the boulders and the rushing waters, the policeman concludes that Faith carelessly died while playing on the bridge as a result of "a most unfortunate accident" (25).

Nehemiah helps Scholastica's mother to run away from her matrimonial home. He is both Scholastica's and her mother's sex partner. His confession that he drove her mother away from home early one morning annoyed Scholastica. He also said that when he stopped to fill his *Matatu* at the Shell BP Station near River Chania in Thika, she slipped away. In addition, he pointed out that when he caught up with her crossing the bridge near the Blue Post Hotel, she waved him away. He further stated that while seated in his car at the parking lot, he saw her mother disappearing with a cowboy-hatted man in a white Peugeot 405. Nehemiah's confession propels Scholastica to kill him. She says:

How was I to swallow the words of a man who'd helped steal my mother? Gooseberries [raise] their heads on my naked flesh. I [have] to snatch breath in tiny sips. ... Perhaps it [is]

shame or shock or fear, or just too dark for him to see, but all Nehemiah [does is] tremble as I [unfold] my body to slash his carotid artery. (35-36)

As far as Scholastica is concerned, Nehemiah plotted her mother's disappearance. This is tantamount to stealing her mother. She is never suspected of his murder and no investigations lead to her. She also kills her boyfriend when he supposedly violates her daughter. She says: "Then I [return] to seek my Luo man because despite the intimate things he [knows] that [bind] us, he [has] used my daughter to punish me. And I [kill] him because of the grip, power and circular nature of history" (42).

Before Scholastica murders the Luo man, who was a lecturer, he is taken to court and thereafter released following his defence that he was bonding with Scholastica's child and did not really intend to hurt her. Scholastica wonders "What is the difference between bending and bonding, and breaking..." (46). As far as Scholastica is concerned, the lecturer abuses her daughter but he is set free and thus she takes the law into her hands. Her arrest becomes a rallying point for the author to challenge those living in the community to apprehend sexual abusers. She says: "On the wings of my brutalised history they decided to raise awareness of the terrible plight of the girl child and the issue of domestic violence ..." (43). Garland takes a feminist stance to foreground the female protagonist in this novella as an agent of social change in regard to sexual violation towards women.

The murder of the lecturer opens an avenue for self-expression and reinvigorates a sense of violence in Scholastica who is an unfulfilled woman. She has grown up in a society where she has not been allowed to express her opinion on the oppression she has been subjected to. Regarding the question of her silenced voice, it appears logical for Garland to assign her speech and a position of relative and crucial power: "'You are to be admired after all' ... because instead of taking the easier route of abortion you took the burden of mothering your...father's baby" (43). Scholastica is complemented for taking it upon herself to safeguard life and hence chose not to terminate her pregnancy even though it is from an incestuous relationship. Garland seems to commend Scholastica for her motherly instinct. In the same breath, she castigates men who view women as objects of sexual

gratification especially in circumstances where the perpetrator is a close relative.

Scholastica's acts of murder, incest and the circumstances under which these acts are perpetrated point to her life of victimhood and hence she has a complex motivation, which runs from her childhood to adulthood. She is a victim of experiencing her adolescence and adulthood without a biological mother. Thus, she is distraught at the disappearance of her mother and hence develops a distorted self. In this novella, Garland manipulates Scholastica's victimised position to extol courage in women. Scholastica's assumption of this role is in itself an effort to advocate for women's visibility which is necessary for their effective participation in the society. Her murder of the lecturer, therefore, raises interest for she is not just another female but one who is "a representative of our 300,000 teachers in the country, [says] a lady lawyer in a stripped man-suit, although [she] was yet to qualify as a teacher in the teaching profession. 'Your voice is bound to cause ripples'" (43). This statement implies that Scholastica may finally transcend her voicelessness since she has refused to be relegated to the position of a congenial other who endorses her own subjugation.

Scholastica is commended for facing challenges of life courageously. Her courage springs out of a female self that has been consumed by despair as her background and predicament reveal. Her power and ability to fight back against such predicament is understood as a struggle to articulate her selfhood. She eventually refuses to assume the stark silence of resignation and thereby says 'no' to a resigned female self. The writer uses Scholastica as a catalyst for female self agency. She pushes the idea that men should not get "away with rape and defilement" (45), even though murder is not the best way to deal with the sexual violators. Through her arrest following the murder of the lecturer, Scholastica is allocated a self-identity that is highly politicised in order to accord her and fellow women space in the contemporary society. By so doing, Garland makes Scholastica the narrating character, and therefore an integral part of the experiencing narrator's quest for justice in regard to perpetrators of acts of sexual violence, particularly incest and rape.

Scholastica's life in refutation explains her tendency to aggressive behaviour. Garland uses her to redresses

socio-economic structures that define gender power relations affecting the women and to also advocate for women rights. She writes:

Editors of the *Nation* and *East African Standard* wrote editorials calling on members of parliament to plan a sexual-crimes bill. Listeners called in on Citizen, Kass, Kenya Broadcasting and Kameme FM to comment on my story. Some said I was desperate or unfortunate. (44)

The narrative is oriented towards the identity crisis of Scholastica as a female living in postcolonial nation. The writer uses outrage that turns fatal to redefine the relevance of women in the nation. Although Scholastica's acts of murder could be traced to a troubled female self, her action can be interpreted as a demonstration of heroic agency that marks women's commitment to resisting any form of violence against them. The author seems to suggest that only demystification of sexual issues in the domestic and public sphere could help women to chart their selfhood and nationhood.

The violence that characterises Scholastica, the experiencing "I," is a lingering after-effect of her brutalised self. She strips herself of her humanity, dignity and becomes an apprentice of violence and hate. As such, she becomes a law unto herself and executor of violence and destruction, and evokes hatred. The disturbance she suffers as a result of her mother's disappearance, sexual victimisation and accompanying post-traumatic stress make her sense of pain unbearable and shifts her own pain to others.

In this novella, *Tracking the Scent of my Mother*, Garland has used textual representation to condemn incest as a form of sexual violation. She also seems to be questioning the woman's place in the society amidst rampant sexual violation even in the family set up. Garland uses outrage that turns fatal to redefine the relevance of Scholastica as a women in the society. Although her acts of murder could be traced to a troubled female self, her action can be interpreted as a demonstration of heroic agency that marks a woman's commitment to resisting sexual violence.

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