

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **A study of the portrayal of virginity in Ugandan novels**

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**This paper examines the portrayal of virginity in Akiki K. Nyabongo's, *Africa Answers Back* (1936), Mary Okurut's *Invisible Weevil* (1998) and Jane Bakaluba's *Honeymoon for Three* (1975). The study analyzes the place of virginity in African traditional marriage. The girls are trained by the elder mothers and aunts to remain a virgin until their wedding night. In Africa, virginity is highly valued that even if one is not a virgin, one is better off to pretend in order to avoid embarrassment. This study has used a qualitative content analysis of three Ugandan novels to unfold subjective interpretation of the text data preceded by identification of the themes and the main characters. Qualitative content analysis has guided us to investigate how important virginity is in African traditional marriage. This study found out that in African traditional marriage, virginity is one of the core values that are cherished because it brings stability and harmony into marriage. Africans believe that if a girl has been faithful before her wedding she will remain faithful even in her marriage. Premarital sex is horrible because it steals the woman's virginity and destroys the foundation of upcoming marriage.**

**Key words:** Virginity, premarital sex, African traditional marriage, Nyabongo, Okurut, Bakaluba, Nkwanzu, Genesis, Naiga, Chief Ati.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper analyses the portrayal of virginity in Akiki Nyabongo's *Africa Answers Back*, Mary K. Okurut's *Invisible Weevil* and Jane Bakaluba's *Honeymoon for Three*.

A study in Sweden by Cooper and Nylander (2010) observed that generally a woman who has not experienced vaginal-penile heterosexual penetrative sex is a virgin. A study by Olson and Garcia-Moreno (2017) noted that virginity was valued by almost all religious sectors and cultures of the world. With time the trend has changed. However, some communities still uphold

virginity as a value that should not be destroyed and some perform virginity examination before marriage. To Olson and Garcia-Moreno (2017) communities within these countries still hold on to the values of virginity: Egypt, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Afghanistan, Palestine, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Turkey, Uganda, and Iran.

The coming of Colonialism to Africa destroyed the African traditional values of faithfulness, honesty, virginity and fidelity (Igboin, 2011). Before it was distorted by Western influence, Africans attached so much value to

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faithfulness in marriage that prostitution, rape, homosexuality, lesbianism, divorce and single parenthood were unheard of. For a woman to be found a virgin at marriage carries a high value and a dignity that attract respect and honour to her parents and the family.

### Statement of the problem

Although the western world has tried to underrate virginity in the majority world, it has stood the test of time in many countries of the south. Virginity is still taken to be an important value that is treasured in a bride. In some places, marriage is disbanded as soon as the bride is found to have lost her virginity.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

A Study in Ethiopia by Molla Mitike, Yemane Berhane and Bernt Lindtjørn (2008) found out that maintaining virginity is still a way of securing marriage for girls, particularly in rural areas. Molla et al., (2008) observe that the reason for keeping the virginity of boys and girls was for marital purposes.

A study by Olson and García-Moreno (2017) noted in their literature search that the existing social rationale for testing virginity is that an unmarried female's virginity is indicative of her moral character. Virginity is social value and it is important in the context of marriage eligibility, sexual assault assessment, employment application and the like. Cooper and Nylander (2010) also cite sources that believe virginity is prestige and social honor or value resulting from positions that are established through social assessments.

A study by Cooper and Nylander (2010) revealed that in Islamic culture, remaining a virgin until the wedding day is very important. They note that girls are encouraged to save their hymen for their husband and around the wedding night, rituals take place to prove the bride's virginity. Some girls are taken to medical doctors to get a certificate of their virginity. In some cases, cloth with the woman's blood has to be demonstrated to the relatives, friends and neighbours at the first consummation of marriage. If they prove that bride is not a virgin, the marriage can be dissolved.

A study by Carpenter (2002, 2005) noted that women's virginity holds a greater social value than men's because it is perceived and portrayed as a gift given to bridegroom on the wedding day. But sometimes women are disappointed by the experience they go through as compared to its importance and significance. A study in Vietnam by Manh La (2005) found out that virginity is the most valuable asset of a young woman and virginity is not only men's concern, but also the concern of young women and their parents and virginity of a woman was observed through the bloodshed on a handkerchief after

the first sexual intercourse of the couple on the wedding day. Manh La (2005) continued to observe that to be virgin by the Vietnamese is to be a morally "good" woman. This belief influences Vietnamese culture.

The study by Manh La (2005) in Vietnam revealed that her cousin Van returned to her family with serious bruises all over her body. Van was bitten and tortured by her husband on the wedding night because she was found not a virgin. The biting was severe until Van confessed that she had engaged in sexual relationship with her former boyfriend. Nam who is Van husband condemned her for not being a virgin and bringing shame to his family. This is an indication that virginity is still treasured by some countries. And therefore, it must be guarded jealously.

A feminist perspective as portrayed by Cooper and Nylander (2010) study who argue that men who are speaking on behalf of women's sexual health are problematic and illustrate patriarchal connotations as men are seen determining the value of women's sexuality.

This paper analyses the depiction of virginity in Akiki K. Nyabongo's, *Africa Answers Back* (1936), Okurut's *Invisible Weevil* (1998) and Bakaluba's *Honeymoon for Three* (1975).

### METHODOLOGY

The design is a qualitative descriptive study of three Ugandan novels. The method used is a qualitative descriptive content analysis. In this case the researchers read the texts several times, coded them, generated concepts from which themes were derived.

### Theoretical framework

In this study, post-colonial theory was used, which is not a single theory but combination of different theories. Post-colonial studies are based on the main aspects of colonialism and its pervasive effects which have persisted even after the end of the colonial rule. This theory has helped to explain the themes as portrayed in the three Ugandan novels.

### Authors biographies

#### *Mary Karooro Okurut*

Mary Karooro Okurut was born in Bushenyi district of Uganda on December 8, 1954. She graduated from Makerere University in 1977 with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Literature. In 1981, she graduated with the degree of Master of Arts in Literature from Makerere University and began lecturing in the Department of Literature. She continued lecturing until 1993 when she took up employment as the press secretary to the Vice-President of Uganda. Between 1996 and 1999, she served as Commissioner, Education Service Commission in the Ugandan Ministry of Education. From 1999 until 2004, she served as the press secretary of the President of Uganda. In 2004, she entered elective Ugandan politics. Prior to her political career, Okurut was perhaps best known for her contributions to Ugandan literature both as a writer and as the founder of the Uganda Women Writers Association (FEMRITE), an organization which has since received international

attention and has to date produced one winner of the Caine Prize, Arach Monica de Nyeko, whose story *Jambula Tree* won in 2007.

Karoro Okurut's literary publications include these books: *The Curse of the Sacred Cow* (1993), *The Adventurous Sisters* (1993), *The Invisible Weevil* (1998), *The Official Wife* (1997), *The Blood Brothers* (2003), *Potiphar's Grand Daughter* (2013), and *The Switch* (2016). She also edited *A Woman's Voice* (1998), a collection of short stories by Ugandan women writers.

### **Akiki Nyabongo**

According to Kahyana (2016), Akiki Nyabongo was born in 1904 to Omukama Kasagama, King of Toro Kingdom, which had come under Britain's influence in 1891 when Captain Fredrick Lugard of the Imperial British East Africa Company signed a treaty with the Omukama, in which he promised to 'protect' him against Omukama Kabarega, the powerful king of the Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom whose forces had fled. Nyabongo studied at Harvard University for an MA and Oxford University for a PhD in Philosophy and worked at Tuskegee University and North Carolina A&T University in the 1940 and 1950s. He returned to Uganda after the country became independent in 1962. His main literary work is *Africa Answers Back* (1936) which was initially published as 'story of an African chief' (1935).

### **Jane Jagers Bakaluba**

Jane Jagers Bakaluba's date of birth, education and other literary works could not be accessed. Her main literary work is *Honeymoon for Three* (1975).

### **Okurut's synopsis on 'The Invisible Weevil'**

In *The Invisible Weevil*, Okurut makes the contemporary Ugandan socio-political situation the setting for her work. She deals with closely entangled social contradictions that are a common feature of the Ugandan society. Nkwanzu and Genesis love each other and have done so for a long time. But Nkwanzu will not give into pre-marital sex because she wants to remain a virgin up to her wedding night, to "redden" the traditional white sheet and honour her parents, according to custom.

As fate would have it, Senga, who was preparing Nkwanzu for her wedding, leaves her alone briefly to collect something and Rex finds her naked on her bed and succeeds in raping her (Okurut 1998). This puts an end to Nkwanzu's "white-red-sheet dream" and introduces a new crisis in her vision of herself as a woman and in her relationship with Genesis.

Her aunt, Senga, insists that she should not report the rape to the police. She should just get married and forget the rape as simply an unfortunate incident (Okurut 1998). Despite the pressure from the Senga and the mother not to report the rape case to police, Nkwanzu goes ahead to report. Rex was arrested and the wedding goes ahead. This rape case punched a hole in the long awaited and anticipated happy marriage between Nkwanzu and Genesis.

### **Bakaluba's synopsis on 'Honeymoon for Three'**

In *Honeymoon for Three*, Jane Jagers Bakaluba tells the story of a young courageous girl, Naiga, who after attending boarding school finds herself unable to accept the values and attitudes of the older generations without questioning them. Naiga turns down the proposal of her father's candidate in favour of a suitor of her own choice; Nuwa, 'the poor Christian'. Her relationship with her family becomes sour and she has to flee in order to marry the man of her

choice. The story takes interesting turns towards the final reconciliation: one of Mukasa's last actions on his deathbed is to forgive his daughter, even if she receives this good news a bit too late.

Virginity is one of the customs which this society values so highly (Bakaluba, 1975). Aunt Sulu has to go with Naiga up to the bedroom with a white bed sheet to be put on the marital bed to get evidence to prove her virginity as she is expected to have sex for the first time. Naiga is supposed to bleed during the first sex with her husband. If the girl's virginity is broken on the wedding night, she will bleed and the white bed sheet will be 'reddened' as Okurut calls it. The aunt will show the 'reddened' sheet to the people as proof that this girl is virgin. The parents are then given gift of a goat by the husband to thank the parents for raising their daughter well and keeping herself until the marriage day. This is what aunt Sulu says:

*"I believe Naiga is virgin. I have no doubt about that, but it must be proved for everybody to know. Nuwa will have to present Mukasa with a live goat as a token of appreciation for a virgin bride"* (Bakaluba, 1975).

If a girl is found not to be virgin, the parents are blamed for bringing up their daughter badly and the parents will miss the honourable gift. The parents especially the mother and the Aunts are ashamed of having such a girl as their daughter. However, in this custom, the boy's virginity is not questioned.

### **Nyabongo's synopsis on "Africa Answers Back"**

*Africa Answers Back* contains four parts. Part I is an account of Europe's incursion into Buganda, starting with the arrival of Henry Morton Stanley at Kabaka Mutesa's court in 1875 and of the missionaries, specifically the Reverend Alexander Mackay of the Church Missionary Society in 1877 and Father Lourdel Mourpel of the White Fathers in 1879. Here, how the Buganda Kingdom is soon plunged into chaos as different religious groups strive to control the Kabaka's court, leading to the 1892 religious wars between Christians and Muslims, and later, between Anglicans and Catholics, in which a powerful chief, Ati, fights on the side of the Anglicans was seen.

Part II depicts Ati's return from the war and the birth of his son, Abala, whom he also names Stanley (after Henry Morton Stanley) and Mujungu (after the missionaries who, to him, 'roam' throughout the land). Part III centres on missionary education in Buganda and details how ten-year old Mujungu receives education at the Reverend Jeremiah Hubert's school. Whilst there, the young Mujungu constantly challenges the missionary about what he believes to be incorrect subject matter (e.g. the missionary's unwillingness to listen to his students' views). Reverend Hubert eventually dismisses him from the missionary school and his father takes him to a private school where he completes his secondary education. The last part of the novel depicts chiefdom in crisis: there is a smallpox epidemic that Chief Ati does not survive. With the help of European medical personnel, Mujungu manages to contain the epidemic, and after being installed as his father's successor, he tries to introduce far-ranging reforms in the kingdom, which his wife and other subjects resent (Kahyana, 2016).

### **Chief prepares to marry 375th virgin girl**

Chief Ati who is a major in *Africa Answers Back* is informed by the messenger that his 375th bride has grown and become beautiful. She is now ready for marriage. Her twelve months of seclusion has come to an end. The bride has to go through intensive training by the elderly women. The teachings are on the dos and don'ts of

marriage. The mysteries of marriage are best taught by mature women who have been there. Within these twelve months, the bride gets special treatment, she does not leave the house, no man sees her, her body is rubbed with cow-ghee twice a day until her body becomes as smooth as jelly fish (Nyabongo, 1936).

After a series of rituals, the bride is veiled in backcloth and is carried by two men to her new home. But before being taken to the man's home, the bride is required to go through the last ritual of sitting on her mother's lap, and then on her father's knees. It is an indication that the parents have released their daughter into marriage. The father now presents his daughter to the family of the bridegroom with the following words: *my daughter is a virgin, healthy, good looking, pure, perfect, and she must be treated well.* The elder from the groom's side then kneels and kisses the hand of the bride's father as a sign that the groom has accepted the bride (Nyabongo, 1936).

After handing the girl to the man, the elderly mother has to witness and approve the virginity of their daughter by being around during the first consummation of bride and groom's love. And if the girl is found to be a virgin, the relatives are given a bull to continue with the celebration of their daughter's successful marriage. The elder mother, who has been taking care of this girl, remains with the bride in her new home for four days in seclusion. The bark-cloth where the marriage has been consummated is taken home by the elder mother to show it to her people that their daughter was a virgin. The bridegroom has to give her a bull as a reward (Nyabongo, 1936). This is the pride of the family and the clan, because they believe that children belong to the entire clan.

### Fake virginity

In African tradition, virginity is of such importance that if a girl is not a virgin, she will fake it in order to avoid an embarrassment. Both Nakintu and Mwambu entered into marriage pretending to be virgins. Nakintu, knowing that she is not a virgin, pretends to be one. She decides to keep quiet about it as a grave. One day after Nakintu bursting into tears as a sign of repentance she announces it to Mwambu, her husband, that Nantogo is not her cousin or niece as she has been lying but her daughter. These are their words:

*"Won't you say something?" Mwambu plainly asked Nakintu. "Ye-ye-yes, I will". "Are you too disappointed in me, Sarah?" .... "No, it's not that," she sighed. "It's that I have something as grave to tell, but can't yet bring myself to do so." .... "Whatever it is, my heart will take it, embrace it, and bear it for the love of you. And, I must add for God's sake. Get it off your mind, forever; and you'll become new, and feel new!" Nakintu buried her face into the blanket on Mwambu's bed and burst into tears. "Sarah my darling one," Mwambu whispered in a tone of ultra tenderness, get it off your mind! "Nantogo isn't my cousin or niece," she announced with a deep groan. "What do you mean by that? Mwambu cut in, visibly puzzled. "She's my daughter," Nakintu let out. Mwambu's mouth fell open, while Nakintu resumed her flow of tears. ... How on earth does a mothering woman successfully trick a man into believing she is a virgin" (Wangusa, 2015).*

Nakintu could not keep quiet forever because she is aware that she is not a virgin. To speak out is to be set free from lies and to receive salvation in marriage as Mwambu announces. Mwambu too, after being raped by Mayuba, and the outcome of that rape is Buwayilila, he pretended to be a virgin because the society values virginity so much that it is shameful to break ones' virginity before the wedding night. And so the secret which he had kept for long, he decides to confess it to his wife, Nakintu.

*"Sarah, he called, as a strange feeling of relief swept through him, what mother has been saying encourages me to say what I am*

*going to say. It has seemed like a sensitive secret up till now, and it certainly does not deserve to be kept as such. "Then, out with it!" Nakintu prompted him. "Buwayilila is not my nephew. He's my son." Nakintu's face went blank. Just the one thing that never occurred to me... never ... and Mwambu has kept it this long ... as long as I've kept mine ... it's like a vengeance...this incredible coincidence ..."* (Wangusa 2015).

Both Nakintu and Mwambu decided to keep their secret as long as time allowed. But as the saying goes that lies cannot endure forever, so they had to let it go. Nakintu laments that Mwambu has kept it this long as long as she kept hers. She continues to say that it is like 'a vengeance'.

Even though Nakintu had a girl child before her relationship with Mwambu, she pretended to be a virgin but this could not last forever. Mwambu is very surprised and this raced into his mind:

*And he thought, Like that virgin spot of blood on the white linen of our wedding night. How on earth a mothering woman does successfully trick a man into believing she is a virgin (Wangusa, 2015).*

The reddening of the white sheet is a big issue. Mwambu is well informed that Nakintu is not a virgin because on their wedding night the spot of blood on the white linen was not visible. However, he decides to keep it cool since even himself is not one. This is why Okurut in *The Invisible Weevil* reports that after the rape of Nkwanzu by Rex, Senga, insists that this unspeakable act should be buried in their stomach. It should not be disclosed to anybody. She should just get married and never to mention this to Genesis (Okurut, 1998).

When Rex rapes Nkwanzu, Ssenga suggests that this unspeakable thing should be stomached and never to be mentioned (Okurut, 1998). She fears for the consequences. She knows it has the potential to damage the marriage:

*"I have just been raped," she stated in a voice devoid of any emotion. What? The two exclaimed incredulously, both holding Nkwanzu from either side.*

*"Yes, I've been raped"*

*"It can't be..."*

*"But who..."*

*"Rex."*

*"Rex?"*

*"Yes." answered the embittered bride.*

*"Oh, oh! We're cursed! How can this be? What crime have we committed? Oh my poor child! Oh oh" wailed Ssenga" (Okurut, 1998).*

The virginity that was to be broken by Genesis has now been broken by a rapist but it is still better to keep it secret. Rape is one of the taboos in African traditional societies. The girls are encouraged by the elderly women to keep their virginity because this is the glory of the entire family. And the boys are encouraged by the elderly men to keep their virginity until the wedding day. And to lose it is a big loss.

Ssenga is lamenting on rape as a taboo in African society. She says in their days, rape was not common as they are these days (Okurut 1998). Rape was unheard of in African traditional society. It is a foreign thing.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In African traditional marriage, virginity is one of the values which are cherished because it brings harmony

into the marriage (Moler, 1982). Africans believe that if a girl remains faithful before her wedding, she will do the same even after it. Premarital sex is nasty because it steals the woman's virginity and destroys the foundation of future marriage (Kyalo, 2012). Bhana and Anderson (2013) observed that virginity brings respect and recognition among the youth. Bhana (2016) says that Africans defend virginity because it is grounded and inspired by deep cultural connections. Bhana continues to say that virginity is an important resource for respect, status and an identity. Nyakato (2010) writing for New Vision gives a detail understanding of virginity in the Ugandan cultural context. She says "virginity was something to be proud of" in the African traditional society. She says that in certain communities, the price for losing virginity was death and it is believed that many girls were drowned in Lake Bunyonyi and Kisizi Falls.

Okurut in *The Invisible Weevil* portrays the conflict between the Western and African traditional perception of sex before marriage. Genesis is tired of waiting for sex from his girlfriend Nkwanzu, and has this to say:

*"Yes. I'm fed up with your holy attitude. Simply because some old-fashioned aunt of yours told you about some damned sheet, you then torment me"* (Okurut, 1998).

Nkwanzu responds that it is not just the sheet and continues, I believe we should keep our bodies intact until marriage. Virginity should be treasured, not despised (Okurut, 1998).

Bhana (2016) supports Nkwanzu by arguing that the belief of virginity is valued in many contexts beyond KwaZulu-Natal and it is shaped by patriarchal control and the regulation of female sexuality.

Nkwanzu is such a typical African girl who cannot be moved just by a man's emotions. She is an image of African societal values because of the training that she has received from her aunt, the custodian of her culture.

Bakaluba in *Honeymoon for Three* presents Mrs Horne and Aunt Sulu in dialogue on how Naiga's virginity will be proved on the wedding night:

*"I believe that Naiga is a virgin. I have no doubt about that, but it must be proved for everybody to know. Nuwa will have to present Mukasa with a live goat as a token of appreciation for a virgin bride. This is our custom, it is our tradition"* (Bakaluba, 1975).

Aunt Sulu believes that the bride, Naiga, is a virgin, but it must be proved for everyone to know. She is expected to be present to prove whether the white sheet is stained with blood on the wedding night or not. The aunt will carry this white sheet outside and show it to the people as proof that she guarded her culture. In return, the groom will have to present the father of the bride (Mukasa) with a live goat as a token of appreciation.

Bhana (2016) agrees with Aunt Sulu when she suggests that virginity has dual function of bringing bride wealth, cattle or cash fulfilling the patriarchal bargain and the greater pride and dignity. Mrs Horne is extremely surprised at the strange custom (Bakaluba, 1975).

Kyalo (2012) argues that the traditional marriage system of going into marriage when one is a virgin gives the proper ingredient for a healthy marriage. Africans understood marriage in its right, and had a way of upholding its richness and value. Therefore, a virgin bride is an honour to her parents and a prize to her husband. Bhana and Pattman (2011) assert that boys want to have sex with a girl who is a virgin because they say a virgin is very cool.

In *Africa Answers Back*, Nyabongo (1936) depicts the theme of virginity in Chief Ati's marriage to his 375th wife. He portrays an elaborate marriage process with several rituals which ends with the bride's party handing the bride to the bridegroom. The elder mother of the bride stays behind with her for four days in seclusion. The bark cloth where the marriage has been consummated is taken home by the elder mother to show it to her people as a proof that their daughter was a virgin. The bridegroom then gives the elder mother some gifts to take home. Virginity is the pride of the bride's family (Nyabongo, 1936).

Africans take virginity as social value because it has a historical and material basis and derives from culturally embedded notions of respect (Harrison, 2008). Hunter (2010) argues around male power that regulates female sexuality and emphasizes the importance of virginity. Even if modernity shuns virginity as backward and a violation of human rights, it keeps African marriages stable and free from promiscuity. It is an African value to be cherished.

The paper examined portrayal of virginity in Akiki K. Nyabongo's, *Africa Answers Back*, Mary Okurut's *Invisible Weevil* and Bakaluba's *Honeymoon for Three*.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that the three Ugandan novels portray virginity as the age-old virtue of African traditional society which is highly valued; it should not be allowed to die because of other influences that come with modernity. This is why Ugandan novelists give it special attention in their works. The African elders should continue to encourage the youth to keep their virginity because it keeps the marriage and family stable.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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