

BREAKING THE CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE: REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL ACTORS IN THE ONLINE NARRATIVES OF NIGERIAN RAPE VICTIMS

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Abstract

This paper explores discursive strategies Nigerian victims of rape deploy in narrating their traumatic experiences. Data for the study comprise purposively selected online narratives of two major Nigerian rape victims circulated on *Pulse.ng* and *Nairaland* in 2018 and 2019 respectively. The data are analysed qualitatively using van Leeuwen's social actors' model, a framework that describes how participants of social practices are represented in discourse. The analysis reveals that the rape survivors deployed different mechanisms of representation of social actors, such as nomination, categorisation, beneficialisation, and honorification in their narratives to assert themselves, construct power, expose perpetrators and contest specific institutionalised forces that suppress them. These are done to challenge repressive traditions thus, breaking the culture of silence and revealing the dynamic nature rape discourse is assuming in Nigeria. The paper concludes that the discursive strategies highlighted in the selected narratives evince self-representations of rape victimhood.

Keywords

rape, culture of silence, stigmatisation, traumatic asylum, victimhood, personal online narratives, repressive tradition, digital activism, social actors, self-representation

1 Introduction

In Nigeria, statistics show that a vast majority of rape victims avoid making any formal report to the police due to fear of stigmatisation, police extortion, and lack of trust in the Nigerian criminal justice system (Awobamise et al. 2019, Adegbeye 2020). This has made proper documentation of rape cases a herculean task. Notwithstanding, efforts are being made daily especially by international bodies, Non-Governmental Organizations (henceforth, NGOs), human rights groups, among others, to track the number of rape cases in Nigeria (Kolawole & Obilade 2014). In a research conducted in 2019 about the primary narrators of rape cases in Nigeria (Awobamise et al. 2019), statistics show that NGOs take 86.4 per cent of the culminative percentage. This is further reiterated by the report of Amnesty International (2021) that 11,200 rape cases occurred in Nigeria in 2020. This was far more than what the Nigerian police reported. Among those

cases, according to the Amnesty International report (2021), were Vera Uwaila Omosuwa, Hamira, Barakat Bello and Favour Okechukwu. Omosuwa, a 22-year old microbiology student was raped and brutally assaulted in a church near her home in Benin, Edo state. She died a couple of days later from her injuries. Hamira, a five-year-old, was drugged and raped by her neighbour in April 2020. Barakat Bello, an 18-year-old student, was raped and butchered during a robbery in her home in Ibadan, Oyo state. Similarly, Favour Okechukwu, an 11-year-old girl, was gang-raped to death in Ejigbo, Lagos state. “Rape, indeed, is a pandemic that has continued to be one of the most prevalent human rights violations in Nigeria” (Amnesty International 2021).

Despite its devastating effects on the victims, there is a culture of silence imposed by society and even the parents of the victims to bury the case regardless of the victims’ feelings because of social stigmatisation that accompanies its revelation (Ikem 2021). Rape, as Fairstein (1995: 147) posits, “remains the only crime in which the victims, most often women, are stigmatized for their participation in an act committed by forcible compulsion”. Instead of receiving empathy and justice from the societies and constituted authorities, many victims of rape had suffered greater punishments from their cultures and traditions. Even when they decided to damn the consequences, volunteered to tell their story and reveal the identity of the evil perpetrators, some people hardly believe their stories (Adegbeye 2020). This perhaps has enhanced the perpetration of the crime.

Silence, according to Ahrens (2006: 263), is “emblematic of powerlessness in our society”. It is used to hold victims bound and keep them in their place. Oftentimes the perpetrators are supposedly superior due to the ‘high positions’ they occupy in the society. For example, some are pastor/lecturer, father/stepfather/uncle, or boss at the workplace, whose social positions make it a daunting task for victims to speak up (Fairstein 1995, Gavey 2013, Kolawole & Obilade 2014, Adegbeye 2020). However, with the emergence of social media, there is a new wave of resistance to this culture of silence. Today, many victims/survivors of rape are saying “No” (Adegbeye 2020) to the culture of silence that has held them bound for decades putting them in a ‘traumatic asylum’. The social media *X* (formerly *Twitter*), *Facebook*, *YouTube*, among others, therefore, encapsulate a structuring philosophy that presents an alternative perspective to the mainstream media. They have liberalised the public space from repressive and autocratic governments and re-invested power in subtly muted citizens in the society to produce their own stories (Falkheimer & Heide 2015, Baer 2017). Consequently, social media have empowered rape victims to break the silence by recounting their stories.

Though previous studies have examined different factors responsible for rape as well as its attendant effects on the victims (Kawu 2013, Ashiru & Orifowomo 2015, Chiazor et al. 2016); impact of gender-based violence on girls' education in Nigeria (Uwameiye & Iserameiya 2013) and womanhood in Nigeria (Arawomo 2018); and indirect/third party account of real life experiences of rape victims within the university community and the attendant effects on the victims (Kolawole & Obilade 2014), they did not examine the personal narratives of rape victims nor investigate how they deploy linguistic and other communicative artefacts on online platforms – *Pulse.ng* and *Nairaland* – to challenge repressive tradition and represent their ordeals. This paper identifies and analyses discursive strategies rape victims deploy in their life stories in the selected online platforms to break many years of silence, articulate self, demystify their oppressors and explicate different social practices endemic in the narratives. In addition, it explicates how strategic uses of social media serve as emancipators of rape victims.

1.1 Social media and the discourse of rape

The proliferation of social media today has brought about the notion of digital activism through which people protest repressive traditions/policies and participate in civic engagements. Instances of such digital activism are the Egyptian Arab uprising of 2011, the American Black Lives Matter of 2013, the Nigerian Bring Back Our Girls of 2014, and the EndSARS movement of 2020, among others. All these succinctly project the vital role social media sites play in the online mobilisation of people to champion a cause, challenge repressive traditions and advocate social justice (Hart & Mitchell 2015, Nwabueze & Oduah 2015). Though social media are not without their shortcomings and demerits such as deploying them for cyberbullying, disseminating fake news and inciting violence (Sparks 2002, Armakan 2017), they are platforms for emancipation and empowerment. The masses across the globe have found them vital for voicing their concerns and expressing their opinions about certain burning issues that are germane to them. They provide enabling platforms to amplify muted/marginalised voices in the society. Victims of rape are examples of these muted voices across the globe whom through the help of social media have been able to narrate their traumatic experiences to the public in a bid to generate support and seek social justice (Rentschler 2014, Baer 2017, Awobamise et al. 2019).

Social media networks have helped victims of rape overcome stringent structural obstacles to communicative power which has been institutionalised by traditional media. Most importantly, they have empowered rape victims to recount their stories, contest specific institutionalised forces that suppress them and seek social justice without any fear of victimisation (Adegbeye 2020). Thus,

they have been used as advocacy platforms to champion different campaign initiatives against rape across many nations of the world today. Such initiatives include #Stand To End Rape (STER), the global #metoo Movement in America and Europe, #Arewametoo (Nigeria) and We Will Not Be Silent (Lagos), among other initiatives.

These social movements against rape afford high level sensitizations, in recent times, through which victims/survivors have been emboldened to move to the social space and narrate their traumatic experiences that have tormented them for years (Haneefa 2019). Consequently, the tide is changing against the culture of silence and all that it represents in African societies, especially Nigeria. This study, therefore, extends the scholarship on rape discourse by unpacking discursive features that two rape victims/survivors – Busola Dakolo and OluTimehin Adegbeye – deploy as critical tools in their narratives circulated on *Pulse.ng* and *Nairaland* to assert self, construct power, expose perpetrators and contest specific institutionalised forces that suppress them. It also explores how they utilise social media to generate support against the culture of silence in Nigeria.

2 Theoretical framework

Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actors' model serves as the theoretical underpinning for the study. The framework describes how the participants of social practices can be, and are, represented in discourse. The representation of social actors in texts is premised on inclusion and exclusion for specific ideological purposes. According to van Leeuwen (2008: 22), "the choice between generic and specific representation plays a significant role in the representation of social actors". This means, "social actors can be represented as part of a class of people (genericised), or represented as identifiable individuals (specified)" (Bernard 2018: 86). Van Leeuwen (2008) illustrates this by making a distinction between how experts are represented specifically and 'ordinary people' generically in print media directed at middle class readers.

There are different processes through which social actors can also be represented in texts. These are 'individualisation' and 'assimilation'. Through the process of individualisation social actors are referred to as individuals, while assimilation refers to social actors as groups. Assimilation is of two types: 'aggregation' and 'collectivisation'. While aggregation uses statistics to quantify social actors and represent them with numbers, collectivisation does not. The representation of social actors as groups is also done through 'association' and 'dissociation process'. Bernard (2018: 86) posits that "association refers to groups formed by social actors, which are never labelled in the text while dissociation

refers to unformed association, which means that a text at first associates two actors, and then dissociates them". The mechanisms of 'indetermination' and 'determination' also play an important role in the representation of social actors in texts. Indetermination refers to a situation whereby the identity of social actors is not specified or anonymous e.g. when a person is referred to as 'someone' in a text, while determination, on the other hand, refers to a situation when their identity is specified.

Another mechanism of representation of social actors is 'nomination'. Social actors may be nominated or categorised. Nomination, according to Hart (2014: 35), "is typically realised in proper nouns such as 'Gordon Brown' in the statement: Immigrants coming to the UK must learn English, Gordon Brown said yesterday (The Mirror, 6 June 2006)".

In nomination, the speaker is concerned with the issue of formality. Nominations may also be 'titulated' either through 'honorification' involving the addition of titles such as 'Dr' or through 'affiliation', often specifying a functional role in a particular institution. Titulation, according to Hart, often "serves to legitimize social actors" (2014: 35). Categorisation, on the other hand, is further subcategorised into two: 'functionalisation' and 'identification'.

'Personalised' or 'impersonalised' mechanisms are another process of representation of social actors in texts. Social actors are personalised when they are represented as human beings through the use of "personal pronouns, proper names, nouns or any other choice which has the semantic feature of 'human'" (van Leeuwen 2008: 46, Bernard 2018: 86). Impersonalisation, as Bernard (2018: 86) asserts, "is a textual action by means of which human social actors are represented with words which do not have the semantic feature of 'human'". Van Leeuwen (2008: 47) identifies two categories of impersonalisation which are 'abstraction' and 'objectification'. Abstraction occurs when the quality assigned to social actors in texts are used to represent them such as "describing immigrants as 'problems'" (ibid.). Objectification, on the other hand, occurs when social actors are represented in light of a place or thing they are closely associated with or activity they engage in.

There are four categories of 'objectification' which are: spatialization, utterance autonomisation, instrumentalization and somatisation. In 'spatialization', the place with which social actors are closely associated is used to represent them, for example, South African, Aso Rock, White House, etc. In 'utterance autonomisation', social actors are represented with reference to their utterances. In 'instrumentalization', social actors are represented in terms of the instruments they use to carry out an action, while 'somatisation' refers to a situation whereby social actors are represented with reference to a body part (Bernard 2018: 37).

All these are the mechanisms identified by van Leeuwen through which social actors are represented. They indicate the perspective from which text producers want their readers to understand the social actors depicted in a particular social action. Therefore, using the model, the study explores how these mechanisms are deployed as discursive strategies by rape survivors to represent different social actors in their narratives, deconstruct the culture of silence, assert self (emancipation), expose perpetrators, and challenge the repressive traditions that suppress them.

3 Research methodology

The data for the research comprise purposively selected posts of rape narratives of two major survivors in Nigeria – Busola Dakolo and OluTimehin Adegbeye – circulated online in 2018 and 2019 respectively. The posts, which were screenshot, were retrieved from the archives of *Pulse.ng* and *Nairaland*. These are Nigerian online platforms that feature topical issues about Nigerians, especially celebrities and popular people in the society. They remained the most accessible platforms whereby the incidents and update continued to be discussed after the Nigerian government had placed a ban on the use of *Twitter* in Nigeria. Many of the former posts circulated during the heat of the ‘revelations’ were therefore culled from *X* and *Instagram* accounts of the survivors and reposted on *Pulse.ng* and *Nairaland*. While Dakolo’s case was retrieved from *Pulse.ng*, Adegbeye’s was retrieved from *Nairaland*. Although there are many other rape survivors, these two have remained the most tenacious and outspoken who fearlessly and publicly revealed their identities, those of their alleged perpetrators, and eventually garnered both national and global support to fight their cause.

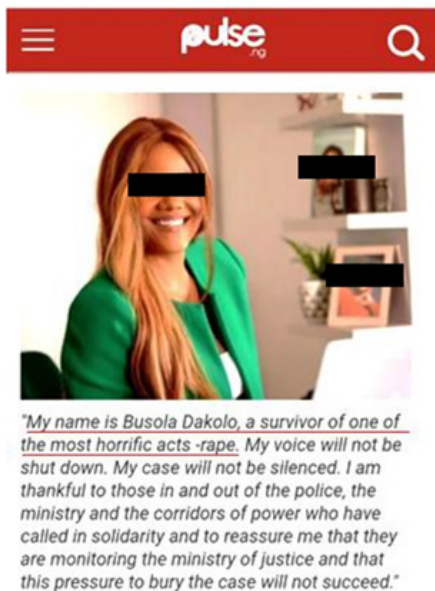
Despite the fact that their testimonies are in the public space, the author went further to secure official permission from the survivors to use their narratives for academic research. One of them, Ms Adegbeye, enthusiastically granted permission via email while, unfortunately, all effort to reach the other survivor proved unsuccessful. However, the links to the narratives as presented in the public domain have been indicated under each of the data analysed in this study. Eight of the posts/screenshots of their narratives that had overt social actors’ mechanisms were purposively selected for analysis. The images in the data are blurred to protect the physical identity of the social actors. The study is qualitative as it critically explores different discursive strategies the rape survivors deployed to narrate their traumatic stories, represent social actors and construct power. The notion of social actors as used in this study refers to the ideological representation of the key stakeholders of rape discourse in Nigeria who are involved in either perpetrating the culture of rape, i.e. the rapists

(perpetrators), the victims (survivors) or preventing/ending the perpetration, i.e. the government, media houses and legal system among others. The data are labelled in Arabic numerals Text 1-8 and the analysis is guided by van Leeuwen's (2008) social actors' model which gives insights into the sociological/ideological significance of the representation of social actors in text production.

4 Analysis and discussion

4.1 Assertion of self as victor

One of the variables that make rape narratives appealing and compelling to people in our contemporary world is the way survivors use social media platforms to reveal their identity damning the consequences of such action as indicated in Texts 1 and 2 respectively.



Text 1: My name is Busola Dakolo (<https://www.pulse.ng/entertainment/celebrities/busola-dakolo-shares-update-on-case-against-coza-pastor-biodun-fatoyinbo/qtsezlc>)

In Text 1, the rape survivor, Busola Dakolo, boldly reveals her identity by spelling out her name with a matching photograph to narrate her rape ordeal that happened during her childhood age. The statement, “*My name is Busola*

Dakolo, a survivor of one of the most horrific acts – rape”, in paragraph two of Text 1 contradicts the normative way in which rape cases used to be managed in Nigeria. The visual representation of the survivor together with her official name is an example of van Leeuwen’s ‘semi-formal nomination’ (Hart 2014: 35). The survivor strategically deploys the mechanism of nomination as a discursive strategy to reveal her identity, personalise her experience and assert self, construct power, delegitimise anonymity and ideologically represent self as victor. Through the phrase, “*a survivor of one of the most horrific acts – rape*”, she further reiterates her determination as well as the intentionality with which she desires to be identified. The phrase shows the determination of the survivors and her victory. It reveals how the survivor has garnered strength over the years to overcome the pains and horrors of her traumatic experience placing her in a position of power within the social space (her Instagram page) to expose the heinous act, fight it and be the voice of many rape victims. The purposive identification of self by the survivor, through the use of proper noun, lends credence to the veracity of the narrative and reinforces Castello’s (2013: 12) notion of “incontrovertible fact”. It is also a representation of a revolt against the repressive culture of silence which has been the hallmark of rape cases in Nigeria. A similar mechanism is adopted in OluTimehin Adegbeye’s narrative in Text 2.



Text 2: Who sexually assaulted me (<https://www.nairaland.com/5313514/big-brother9ja-sexually-assaulted-me>)

Text 2 is the emphatic statement of OluTimehin Adegbeye which was circulated on *Nairaland* from the survivor’s page to remind Nigerians of the alleged rape crime committed against her. OluTimehin Adegbeye publicly alleged that she was once sexually assaulted by Andre Blaze Henshaw, the voice behind Big Brother Naija in 2018 (BB Naija is a Nigerian reality competition television

series, cf. Within Nigeria 2018). OluTimehin Adegbeye deploys a relative clause, “*who sexually assaulted me*”, as a mechanism of ‘determination’ to disclose and specify the identity of the alleged perpetrator of the heinous act and the recipient of the act. This is strategic as she deploys this mechanism to personalise her experience. Through the use of objective personal pronoun *me* in the statement, OluTimehin Adegbeye indicates how her human right was trampled upon. The use of objective personal pronoun *me* in the statement ideologically portrays the social actor – Adegbeye – as “a once upon a time victim of rape” who has been able to overcome the traumatic experience, thereby ready to assert herself by personalising and revealing her ordeal. This suggests that the social actor has perhaps left the phase of seeing herself as a victim but now a survivor of one of the accidental occurrences of life. This is reinforced in the opinion she wrote in the New York Times on rape matter in Nigeria where she asserts, “*As a survivor myself, and one who has come forward publicly as well...*” (Adegbeye 2020). This is unconventional in the discourse of rape, as anonymity is usually the strategy deployed in managing the cases. Thus, the social actor – OluTimehin Adegbeye – in Text 2 seems to align with Busola Dakolo in Text 1 that the era of secrecy is long gone. Victims of rape are actually not ‘victims’ but ‘survivors’ of traumatic experiences. This position is suggestive of their determination to personalise their traumatic experiences and narrate their rape ordeal from the victors’ points of view.

4.2 Representation of rape perpetrators as ignoble

Another major hurdle that survivors of rape in Nigeria find difficult to scale in order to get people to believe their traumatic experiences is the social status of the perpetrators of rape. Oftentimes their social status makes people assume they are people of noble character and as such they could not perpetrate such evil. Statistics have shown that many of the perpetrators of rape cases/sexual harassments have [+ HIGHER ROLE] statuses (cf. Koss & Harvey 1991, Kolawole & Obilade 2014). The perpetrators are usually important people in the society who occupy positions of power, which, many times, makes it a daunting task for the victims’ narratives to ‘sell’ to the people. In order to protest this, rape survivors deploy strategic social actor mechanisms to validate their stories and represent rape perpetrators as ignoble. This is shown in Texts 3 and 4 respectively.



"It is now officially one year after since I came out and told the most important story of my life up until this point. That when I was a teenager, Biodun Fatoyinbo violently raped me. It wasn't just me. In the media, on social platforms and in private, women have been sharing stories of how this man either destroyed their lives or tried to," she wrote.

"A lot has happened in that time: and my heart is glad that consciousness continues to be raised about the great evil that sexual abuse is, and how widespread it is, and how much women are at risk, and why we need to ensure justice for those who find the strength to speak out."

Text 3: ...violently raped me (<https://www.pulse.ng/entertainment/celebrities/busola-dakolo-shares-update-on-case-against-coza-pastor-biodun-fatoyinbo/qtsezlc>)

Text 3 is one of the screenshots of the update on the alleged rape case Busola Dakolo filed against her supposed abuser, a pastor at one of the biggest new generation Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. In the text, the survivor, Busola Dakolo, deploys the mechanism of 'nomination' to represent the identity of the alleged perpetrator of the heinous act. In Nigeria, pastors are treated with awe and respect because they are seen as God's servants (Magbadelo 2004). This is why people use 'honorification' in the form of titles (Hart 2014) such as *pastor*, *bishop*, or *reverend*, among others as respect markers for them. Contrary to the norm, Busola Dakolo, in Text 3, threw caution to the wind by intentionally mentioning the personal name of the pastor in the statement, "*It is now officially one year after since I came out and told the most important story of my life up until this point. That when I was a teenager, Biodun Fatoyinbo violently raped me*". The use of the personal name of the pastor in the narrative without any honorific marker of *pastor* (van Leeuwen 2008) shows a loss of respect for the supposed perpetrator. The use of the adverb *violently* as a qualifier of the verb *rape* has a negative connotation which dehumanises the alleged perpetrator and reduces him to a common criminal. The survivor strategically deploys the

mechanism to represent the pastor as someone who has fallen below the conduct and character of the noble/divine calling of the position.

To further validate her story and project the ignobility of the man of God, she gave more illustrations of how women have come out at different times on social media platforms to narrate their ordeals. This is shown in the third and fourth sentences of the narrative, “*It wasn’t just me. In the media, on social platforms and in private, women have been sharing stories of how this man either destroyed their lives or tried to*”, she wrote. Through this further explanation, the survivor objectifies the alleged perpetrator by referring to him as “*this man*”. OluTimehin Adegbeye projects a similar perspective of ignobility in Text 4.



Text 4: ...sexually assaulted me (<https://www.nairaland.com/4489320/olutimehin-adegebe-pretty-mike-raped>)

Text 4 is another screenshot of OluTimehin Adegbeye’s exposition of her alleged rape narrative circulated on *Nairaland*. She also deploys the mechanism of ‘nomination’ in the text to publicly disclose the identity of the man that she claimed once raped her when she was incapacitated. Andre is actually assumed to be a man of noble character considering the kind of topic he was invited to address on the BBC, “toxic/evolving masculinity and its impacts”. Unfortunately, by OluTimehin Adegbeye’s rating, the man did not measure up to the standard of being the person to anchor such a programme, given his alleged past records. Thus, the mentioning of the full name of the alleged perpetrator in Text 4 without any ‘titulation’ is an indication of non-recognition of the high esteem bestowed upon him. Also, the utilisation of the full formal name of *Andre Blaze Henshaw*

in the text is perceived to be ideological, as the survivor deploys it to assert her conviction of the identity of the person that raped her a couple of years back. Consequently, OluTimehin Adegbeye is contesting Blaze's nobility in the text. To her, he does not deserve such an honour as to speak to people on the subject matter of toxicity and evolving masculinity.

4.3 Representation of power by rape survivors

Another major issue that runs through rape narratives generally is the deconstruction of power. Contrary to the norm that power lies with the state, society, institutions and rape perpetrators, the current ideology in rape narratives is that the survivors hold the power. They believe that speaking out, revealing the identity of their alleged abusers, castigating injustice and impunity and being resilient regardless of the obstacles on their ways play important roles in the deconstruction of power. Texts 5 and 6 vividly project how rape survivors construct power in their narratives.



"Awareness is victory. But we are pushing to another even great victory: Justice. When the courts last year decided to rule in favour of the man who assaulted me, people were crestfallen. I understood."

"What they didn't know however is that before we even began, we had been prepared for a long haul battle that may take years because the Nigerian legal system isn't wired to help sexual abuse victims get justice."

Text 5: We had been prepared for a long haul battle (<https://www.pulse.ng/entertainment/celebrities/busola-dakolo-shares-update-on-case-against-coza-pastor-biodun-fatoyinbo/qtsezlc>)

Text 5 is a revolutionary text that projects the resilience of the rape survivor against any form of injustice. The survivor, Busola Dakolo, reveals that some state organs that are supposed to defend the cause of the oppressed in Nigeria,

for example, the court, actually acted otherwise by ruling in favour of the alleged abuser. This is affirmed in the statement, “*When the courts last year decided to rule in favour of the man that assaulted me....*”. The noun *courts* in the sentence is an example of ‘instrumentalization’ (van Leeuwen 2008) which the survivor uses to represent the Nigerian state and its legal system. The use of the plural word *courts* in the statement suggests that the survivor did not really enjoy the support of the Nigerian judicial system at its different levels of operation. The reason may be because rape is a sensitive issue which has to be carefully addressed especially considering the status of the alleged perpetrator and the fact that the incident had occurred more than 20 years earlier. She, however, strategically protests the unwillingness of the courts by asserting her resilience in getting justice for herself and other rape survivors in the statement, “*Awareness is victory*”. Contrary to the normative way of constructing power, Busola Dakolo deconstructs the notion of power in the text and indicates that the real power lies with the survivors/oppressed who damn the consequences of stigmatisation, summon courage to speak up about their traumatic experience, reveal the identity of their abusers and challenge repressive traditions.

She further asserts that true power lies with the survivors who are determined to scale psychological, physical, and social hurdles to get justice for themselves. This is reiterated in the statement, “*What they did not know is that before we began, we had been prepared for a long haul battle that may take years because the Nigerian legal system isn’t wired to help sexual abuse victims get justice*”. The anaphoric reference *they* is deployed as a mechanism of ‘determination’ used to specify the actual state organ being referred to, which is the Nigerian legal system. The survivor, through the underlined declarative statement shows her determination and resilience to weather the storm of manipulation, opposition, stigmatisation and disapproval the system may want to impose to prevent justice. Thus, the survivor is represented as being strong, powerful and ready to stand against her oppressor and the state instrument to resist injustice.

The representation of oppression is portrayed in the statement, “*that may take years because the Nigerian legal system isn’t wired to help sexual abuse victims get justice*”. This is an indictment on the state’s legal system. The reason for this submission may be because in Nigeria, cases like this linger for many years in court, which usually leads to denial of justice (Ashiru & Orifowomo 2015). Consequently, she also infers that she is not alone in the quest to get justice, as she has some good support from some legal practitioners, her husband, and committed Nigerians, as indicated in the possessive pronoun *we* in the statement and another text not used here where she wrote, “*I thank my dear husband for his continuous support, friends, our legal team and all who have been standing*

with us on this as I assure you all I am very fine. Thank you”. She strategically represents strength through these assertions that she is not powerless. A similar ideology of power is constructed in Text 6.



Text 6: I am certainly not powerless (<https://www.nairaland.com/4489320/olutimehin-adegebeye-pretty-mike-raped>)

Text 6 vividly projects OluTimehin Adegbeye’s perspective to power construction in the way rape is being handled by institutionalized forces and the society at large. Like Busola Dakolo in Text 5, she laments the abysmal failure of the state and the people in the statement, “*As long as powerful people & institutions do nothing in the face of allegations, abuse will continue with impunity*”. The phrase *powerful people* and *institutions* are mechanisms of ‘genericisation’ (van Leeuwen 2008) deployed to vividly represent the class of people in the society that allegedly encourage rape and the instruments they use to wield power and protect themselves. Though this particular category of people is supposedly powerful in the society, Olu Timehin Adegbeye quickly protests this ideology by expressing her disappointment in both the people, the institutionalised forces that have turned themselves into puppets in their hands and the Nigerian society at large. This is affirmed in the statement, “*I am disappointed but not surprised by the BBC’s actions, in much the same way that I expect to be disappointed but not surprised by the responses I will receive to my words*”. The statement is a representation of the survivor’s perception of rape and the way it is being handled in Nigeria. She expresses her disapproval of the stakeholders’ attitude and asserts that she is not deterred by it. However, she indicates her resolve to go

all the way and get justice. This is projected in the contrast statement, “*But I am not alone. And I am certainly not powerless. #MeToo indeed*”.

Using the first-person subjective pronoun *I*, the rape survivor deploys the mechanism of ‘inclusion’ to specifically represent her determination, strength and courage. She also represents her notion of power as she asserts “*And I am certainly not powerless*”. This vividly shows that, to her, power does not reside with the so-called powerful people who use their position and state instruments to oppress people, but with the oppressed, the rape survivors in this case, who have summoned the courage to speak out, shun social stigmatisation and disclose the identities of their predators. Thus, she deconstructs the notion of power by reiterating that ‘she is not alone’. This indicates that she also has a support system, the ‘*#MeToo*’ movement, which is ready to champion her cause, provide support and ensure that justice is served.

4.4 Breaking the silence

Silence is one of the major challenges rape victims are contesting today in the management of rape cases. The culture of silence is entrenched in the traditions and customs of most African societies to the extent that even parents whose daughters had at one time or another been abused, had vehemently warned their children never to talk about it (cf. Momodu 2018). However, the narrative is changing – many survivors believe that speaking up about their rape experiences is therapeutic. They believe that if they are allowed to tell their stories there is a way it places them in an advantageous position and serves as a catalyst for inner healing and recovery for them. To many of them, imposition of silence is like ‘secondary victimisation’ (Campbell 1998, Ahrens 2006) which they would not want to happen. There is, therefore, an aggressive revolt against the culture of silence in survivors’ narratives as vividly projected in Texts 7 and 8.



Text 7: I am glad that my voice is not silenced (<https://www.pulse.ng/entertainment/celebrities/busola-dakolo-reacts-to-judgment-issued-on-the-rape-case-against-biodun-fatoyinbo/16fjqsm>)

In Text 7, Busola Dakolo, a rape survivor who was once going to be denied social justice by the Nigerian legal system in 2018 (cf. Text 5), uses the mechanism of ‘somatization’, *my voice* (Bernard 2018: 37) in the declarative statement, “*I am glad that my voice is not silenced*”, to boldly denounce the culture of silence and express satisfaction in getting her desired goal. As Ahrens (2006: 263) opines, “silence is emblematic of powerlessness in our society”. She delegitimises the culture of silence by using her ‘voice’ in the text as a symbol of her entire being, power, belief system, ideology about rape and culture of silence that is subtly propagated in the Nigerian social structures. That she was allowed to express herself and tell her rape stories to the public and the court, damning the consequences of stigmatisation, manipulation or blame is actually a positive step in the healing process for her.

Considering her entire statement, it seems she has been relieved of a long-time burden that has held her bound for years. Through the underlined phrase, *court ruling*, in the second statement, “*Busola Dakolo reacts to court ruling*”, the survivor subtly indicts the Nigerian legal system (the custodian of the law)

to wake up to their role in the society and sincerely defend the cause of rape survivors. The *court* is deployed as an ‘instrumentalization’ mechanism in the text to specify the actual organ of the Nigerian state that can really help fight the war against rape, the repressive traditions entrenched in our cultures and get social justice for the survivors. A similar ideology is invoked in Text 8.



Text 8: But speaking out does many things (<https://www.nairaland.com/4489320/olutimehin-adegbeye-pretty-mike-raped>)

The rape survivor OluTimehin Adegbeye in Text 8, by contrast, delegitimizes the culture of silence in the Nigerian society. Using the mechanism of ‘instrumentalization’ like Busola Dakolo in Text 7, the survivor revolts against the repressive culture of silence and asserts that it plays a negative role in the management of rape cases. This is projected in the statement, “*But speaking out does many things that are important, even if it doesn’t end sexual violence*”. She uses the contrastive conjunction *but* in the declarative statement to unequivocally resist the social practice of silence and reiterate *speaking out* as one of the acceptable ways to manage rape cases. For her, speaking out strengthens the survivor, exposes and shames their oppressors, and serves as that vital instrument rape survivors need to bring rape matters to the forefront of national discourse (cf. Awonbamise et al. 2019) and get them on the right path for their healing process.

Thus, for OluTimehin Adegbeye, speaking out is ideological in the management of rape matter. She reiterates this in the hash tag, “*#ItsTime for me to do it. It’s ‘been’ time*”. This shows the determination and intentionality of the survivor to start speaking up and join others to share their rape stories against the normative practice of silence (Adegbeye 2020). The hashtag is ideological as it represents a movement against the culture of silence in Nigeria being organised by some human activists to say ‘*No to secrecy; No to silence*’. Conversely,

the survivor subtly canvasses for breaking the culture of silence, projects zero tolerance for repressive traditions that surround rape issues and advocates for a new order of managing rape cases in the Nigerian society.

5 Conclusion

This study has examined how rape survivors in Nigeria use new media sites as humanistic tools to protest certain repressive traditions that have held them bound in the Nigerian society. It also explored how survivors negotiate power and assert themselves as ‘victors’ contrary to the normative way of representing them as ‘victims’. The repressive traditions range from stigmatisation, conspiracy of silence, re-victimisation, injustice and oppression. Utilising van Leeuwen’s social actors’ model, the rape survivors deploy different representational mechanisms such as nomination, personalisation, spatialisation, genericisation, and instrumentalization, among others, to represent their ideological positions about different issues that associate with the discourse of rape in Nigeria. The theoretical perspective enables a detailed and critical description of the language used by the survivors in the representation of self as victors; alleged abuse perpetrators as ignoble and monstrous; shifting role of power and advocacy for speaking out as a new order for handling rape cases in the Nigerian society. Since the data are direct accounts of the trauma experienced by the rape survivors, they indicate the dynamic nature rape discourse is assuming in the contemporary context of social media communication.

The study demonstrates that the discursive patterns/strategies deployed by rape victims to assert themselves and demonstrate strength are vital to the war against gender/sexual abuse in Nigeria and the world at large. It will, therefore, be useful for legal practitioners, forensic linguists, psychologists, sociologists, scholars and students of discourse studies in understanding the dynamics of discourse of rape in humanistic discourses today. Hence, further studies could be carried out on the revelations of rape by survivors in other countries and the rebuttal/pushback narratives of the alleged rape perpetrators to have a balanced view of rape discourse.

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