

Dynamics of Power and the Face of the New Woman in Zaynab Alkali's The Descendants.

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Abstract

History of traditions and cultures of man in society and the religious achieves albeit gazettes through the ages have not only honoured man, but have ascribed to him superiority and priority of concerns in all matters of life endeavour. Incidentally, as his power increases to effect control over his assets, which include his family, the agony of the (seemingly) marginalized woman is observed to increase, as the entire system operates in his favour. As tension increases over roles and responsibilities in the family, so do reactions and (or) prognostications. This is the background of this study, which features a unique feminist approach to the polemics of women domination and oppression. Here is Alkali's emerging perspective on what appears to be "the face of the new woman" presented in a fresh light, hopeful, progress-oriented as she struggles for empowerment by means of self-development. This is in sharp contrast with the traditional, lamentative tales of women in other Medias. This feature does not appear confrontational as is common with her compatriots in the gender battle of wits.

Introduction:

There is no denying the fact that injustice in form of oppressions, marginalization and other traumatic experiences associated with being females are perpetrated against the African woman. There abound records of torture of widows at mourning rituals; denial of rights over children; cases of men beating their wives at the slightest provocation, or perhaps in asserting their ego; cases of forced marriages to men sometimes old enough to be their grandparents. There are also records of "levitation" which as Zulu Sofola puts it, "is the act of inheriting wives within the family by the brother in-law" allegedly for the continual sustenance of both woman and children since the woman was a dependant liability for husbands' family to mercifully determine her fate.

The subject of feminism has developed an "amoebic" shape over the ages, especially with the many cases of feminists parroting the slogans of the western world's women liberation programmes. The plight of the woman in the West has to do with the non-recognition of women, especially the intellectuals like female writers, professional women and other female thinkers who were sometimes forced to use pseudonyms to be heard (Sofola, 1991).

The woman has ab-initio no personal reality (identity) in the established channel of self-expression in the social order of the community nor has place in the home except as a wall flower, to be seen not heard. Marriage makes her lose her identity completely into the man. She would not even bear her given name. She had to become "Mrs. John Adams" rather than "Mrs. Janet Adams" until women liberation movement in 19th and early 20th century brought about a change. (1991:6)

In the western world, feminist liberation movement was adapted after two centuries of heated struggle for the right of women, prominently marked by such works as Mary Wollstonecraft's **A Vindication of the right of women** (1792) and the American Margaret Fuller's **Women in the Nineteenth century** (1845). The struggle later, extended to Africa, influencing the works of prominent writers like El-Sadawi of Egypt, Mariama Ba of Senegal, Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa and Zainab Alkali of Nigeria among others. These women all write from the African-women point of view. The feminist movement universal actually started as mere concepts, before its rapid spread and growth into a strong ideology of feminists' literature and movement world over. The attendant hues and cries over the concept are not only thorny but grew in equal proportion with its spread. It took on the garb of a complicated gender-cross-cultural miasma.

Some prominent female writers, who pioneered feminist literature in Nigeria; who attacked some of the institutionalized women marginalization and oppression or subjugation include Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mabel Segun, Tess Onwueme, Zulu

Solofa and Zainab Alkali. They all have unfeigned interest in the "woman question" in a male-dominated society. Their perspectives differ on many issues, mostly influenced by their different cultural, religious, educational backgrounds and interests.

Their themes are varied, ranging from helplessness/hopelessness, frustration, persistent disappointment, divorce and uncertainties. Some of these writers expose male brutality against women, and their false values, unreliability, economic control over resources and now struggles for the total empowerment and emancipation of the woman. Most of the projected female characters are caught-up in a web of crises as they struggle for freedom through concerted efforts to acquire education. Their heroines are usually painted as industrious, economically independent, and generally hardworking as they drive for self-fulfillment and freedom. Their eyes are on economic power for self-sustenance with or without men.

It could be discerned even from their divers points of view that the concern of female artists are with gender discrimination that midwived "gender theory" and "feminist literally theory" which directly focus on the liberation and emancipation of the woman. In the same vein, Mario Klarier (1999) asserts that feminist literary theory addresses the assumption of "gender difference" which critics observed have suffered neglect in traditional literary criticisms. There is among others (now) a call for the re-assessment of traditional domains from a gender-oriented perspective. (1999:97).

Discussion:

It is clear thus far that feminists have attained a global status, as it challenges all stereotypes that are associated with the woman. This has to do with the many facets of cultural and religious factors that have brought more to bear on the movement/ideology. Since feminist Literature has continued (in recent times), to be inextricably linked with the cultural, social and economic freedom of the woman, a critical assessment of "the face of the new woman" in Zaynab Alkali's **The Descendants** is of

importance here. Her views on the woman's flight as well as her fight for freedom and definite meaningful identity- appear very startling and important, more so, as Alkali's consciousness raising feature as the source of power for the woman.

This feature of the "new woman" partially rests on an observed change in the artistic portrayal of the female characters within the existing larger debate on the *woman question* which tends to present the audience with more blunt and (or) brutish women who could sometimes exhibit indecency and may equally lack integrity. And on a positive it tends to present her encounter with radical forces of opposition on her way to self-development and the thirst for economic and socio-political recognition/recovery. The artists changing perception of the woman has clearly assumed new dimensions of power and radicalism lately. It is not fair to fail to appreciate the initial brilliance of those teething steps of Li in **The Stillborn**, there is however this new zeal and courage exhibited in the woman's character which gets much clearer in **The Descendants**; she is now a dazzling figure of brilliant light of hope from the erstwhile speechless and powerless, figure she has always been. She seems to have moved away from the defensive into an independent albeit offensive posture. Commenting on this idea Seifa Koroye, she observes that:

The image of the new woman is not *stillborn*, but a fully formed, independent person-that **The Stillborn** presents is inscribed all over with the ascetic ideals of determination and virtue; roles and identity allotted the woman by a male-dominated society, and virtue in being able at the same time to forgive and redeem that man or men in her life who cannot, it seems desist from inflicting on her the most vicious form of oppression and brutality. (47)

It could be for such a reason that Zaynab Alkali's woman appears to be in motion, from her first outing when Li sets out to educate herself to make up for all of life's disappointments to face the future. She appears to have acquired more and more survival skills. In Alkali's words in **The Stillborn**, (after self actualization

the Alkalian heroine) "she wished there was something else to struggle for":

At last she had accomplished her ambitions. She was a successful teacher and owner of a huge modern and enviable building---for ten years she had struggled towards certain goals. Now having accomplished these goals she wished there was something else to struggle for (**The Stillborn**, 82, 101-2)

There is clear indication that Li is a type of woman who has passed through the stages of "false consciousness" or "romantic illusion" to use Koroye's words which tends to present to a partisan audience a mere sense of dreamy goal without action. Li's transition is marked by Awa's statement, "The mourners are outside and waiting for you. You are the man of the house now", (101) which goes to prove the point that she is not a *stillborn* but an independent person, although a woman by nature, she now functions as a man, bearing the mark of his authority. Alkali's Li educates herself and assumes an all-important role hitherto performed by men. It is this onerous manly apparel Li wore that changed her life from mere a survivalist -by breaking the yoke of dependence on men. (Ojinmah, 43) Her decision to return to her husband (Habu) even when he is lame however, confirms the point made by Theodora Akachi Ezeigho that;

Mutual interdependence of the sexes is a consistent theme in the works of female oriented novelists in Africa. "Woman needs a man and a man needs a woman." Many recent novelists are beginning to do this and at the same time upholding the uncompromising viewpoint that women maintain a reasonable measure social and economic independence. (1990:148)

This seemingly beautiful resolution is however short-lived, as Alkali's vision broadens to accommodate new facets of the female predicament, earlier suspended perhaps to give Li's achievements time to digest and to enable the artists' twists and turns to come up with startling surprises. These and more seem to have affected the radical changes that came to be associated with Alkali's character after Li.

In **The Virtuous Woman** there is marked progress, as the girls are not hedged- in by societal restrictions, even as observed by Ojinmah and Agya in their study entitled, **The Writings of Zaynab Alkali (2005)**. The three girls Nana, Laila and Hajjo they opine, appear free and unrestricted. Nana the crippled and deformed heroine is seen as a building up on Li's philosophical statement that "we are all lame," which could stand to present the idea that the society does in fact accommodate all sorts of insights if they actualize and prove themselves relevant.

In the title story in **Cobwebs and other stories** ("cobwebs") Mama the heroine "has thus moved" a stage ahead of her status as a woman bound by man's fetters. The radical and seemingly uncultured step she takes proves the point that she now controls herself in line with what critics observe:

Mama's determination to take her husband and indeed, everybody in her home by surprise is the crux of her feminist struggle. Already, with Imam around, instead of feeling guilty and seeking forgiveness she only finds a joyous celebration of life of womanhood (Ojinmah, 89).

The gap between her and her children is ordinarily strange and morally nauseating, but author's preference for liberty tends to put her in constant motion, towards radicalism. She is no longer the caged bird of "Mallam", even though she is loosing the virtue Alkali so much idolized in **The Virtuous Woman**. She has already skipped the stage of cultural conformity. Mama is set to do what other women cannot do. Alkali is conscious of this, since Ladi, her cousin (although suffering from the stigma of barrenness) attests to the fact that a woman does not reject a man by the ways of their ancestors. How far could we then say that the "face of the new woman" has been enhanced by the woman's struggle on her journey to selfhood in Alkali's latest novel **The Descendants** if she appears to present antithetical states of being? The woman ought to be here or there, that is to say she is either against the traditional ways which clearly subjugates her to the conservative and cultural norms of society or she flounces it for the prize of her liberty. Alkali appears to have opted for the latter.

To enhance the concept of growth and change the artist needed to employ movement or what could be termed the "journey motif." There are movements to school, to the city, by lorry to and fro, the movement from Ramta to Makulpo, all symbolic of movement out of ignorance to civilization; out of cultural bondage to social liberty; out of economic over-dependence to a self actualized self sustaining life; and from killer disease into health and wealth. Alkali keeps these women in steady motion each of them at the point of their realization of the need for change through self development through the instrumentality of western education. As they interlace the landmass in their bid to repudiate the myth of female absolute dependence on man for direction and survival, they socialize and acquire resources which provide them a sort of "bargaining power".

The quality of the new woman, who emerges from **The Descendants** as Seytu rightly possesses, "encapsulates most of the values that Alkali had partially explored in her earlier works." In Seytu however, more of the Alkalian features earlier depicted in characters like Mama in "Cobwebs" are fully explored:

The issue was that of acquiring a different world-view. She now had a different set of values, which did not fit into the values of her own people. She now believed in living by one's own standards. Knowing one's nature and where one was going. What one wanted in life and being in full control of one's destiny. (Cobwebs, 57)

Alkali out rightly features Seytu caught- up in "a complex marital" and socio-cultural entanglement, coming next only to Mama in "Cobwebs". She appears in search of parameters by which to measure the extent to which education could be stretched in its power to emancipate a woman for ultimate freedom from oppressive cultures. It is important to observe the emergence of generations of enlightened women in **The Descendants**. The feminine "shrill voice" is replaced by more authoritative voices of the likes of Magira Milli, Seytu and Hawwa. Magira Milli's strong sense of awareness may actually be a conscious effort by the author to credit womanhood with wisdom and pride-a well

deserved honour she had since been denied or perhaps to establish a background for a legend of foresighted, strong-willed and emancipated women:

Magira Milli may be yesterday's woman, but she was a wise one, not blind to the changes in society. Ramta was not too far away from the major cities. She was a good listener who constantly turned in to her transistor radio. She was also a watcher of events. She knew education is the master key to opportunities for a better life. Education opens doors and gives an individual option in life. (13)

It is pertinent to note the extent to which the author conceives the importance of consciousness raising among women could be used to generate power for the woman, "to influence her social milieu in the light of cohesion rather than disintegration". (Ojinmah, 130) If this aspiration to raise consciousness and change the woman's perspective is anything to go by, then Alkali's campaign for woman empowerment has in its kitty bonuses for daring a dream so cheap but costly. She may however be faced with other social problems identified by Udumukwu who wonders if it is possible for a woman as a subject to function while reified under the structure of an androgynous society?

The extent to which the woman may enjoy the freedom of celebrating her womanhood in the face of sexual inhibitions, denials and traditional taboos are some of the issues Alkali tends to touch in **Cobwebs...** and **The Descendants**. The introduction of promiscuity in redefining womanhood started with Mama's rejection of her husband-Aliyu, distancing herself from her children; then came Seytu's remarriage to Col Hassan. These are very radical new twists in Alkali's feminist-inclined goals, but apparently costly social options. The case of Seytu who intentionally piles marriage upon marriage establishes the readiness of the author to sacrifice decorum for these dreamed-of changes. It may look ridiculous to a casual observer but in all fairness to feminists, the cost of one single "suffocating marriage" outweighs many other social concerns:

I am married, and the woman does pile one marriage over another to contract a third marriage to her old beau. Col Hassan, and her determination to be self-reliant constitute her feminist consciousness. (Ojinmah, 131)

Alkali' may be coming to terms with Buchi Emecheta's position on sexual freedom, thus touring the radical lane common to most feminists' writers:

For Emecheta's individual freedom is tantamount to sexual freedom and sexual freedom is tantamount to promiscuity-to gain economic power (Emecheta's woman) takes to promiscuity (Acholonu, 221) (Bracket added)

With the growing resemblance in their fiction, typified by Mama's pregnancy to Imam in "Cobweb" and Seytu's 'lapping marriages,' one may have to believe that Alkali's stance in both novels have undergone a tremendous transition. If there is any major difference between Li and Seytu, it is in this new light. Alkali's change of attitude from Li to the more radical characters like Mama, and now Seytu cloud most probably is the loud condemnation she received from critics and "feminist fans" for allowing Li to return to Habu in **the Stillborn**:

The plethora of criticism has in its midst a persistent tinge from some feminist critics accusing Alkali of doing a disservice to feminism by ending the book with Li returning to Habu even when there seems to have been no need for such an action, considering all that she had achieved, and the fact that she could stand independent of any man. (Ojinmah, 148)

Conflicting Signals and the Image of the New Woman.

Let us now examine Alkali's position on the questions of whither liberal or radical feminism and her posture on the interdependence of sexes. The subject is discussed respectively by Emenyonu (1990: 148) and Katherine Frank in her article "Women without man; the feminist novel in Africa". According to Frank, the conflict signals in her works may spring from an inherent existing dilemma in feminism itself:

Feminism is by definition an individualist ideology in contrast to the communal nature of African society. This expresses the dilemma of the African woman writer as she wavers helplessly between her allegiance to her culture-her African identity and as her aspiration for freedom and self-fulfillment (Olubukola, 16).

It's apparent then that as Alkali gives the woman a voice to make demands for her right, she needed to "appear authentic and realistic" to create satisfactory role models as maintained by Ezeigho. (149) Therefore, if she dances to the tune of all feminist novelists in Africa as Frank rightly observes, the character ought to be radical, even militant. This is perhaps the platform on which Mama and Seytu emerged. It is for this reason, that Ojinmah and Egya observed that Seytu becomes the new voice for a redefinition in Alkali's version of feminism and what critics call a radical shift in her feminism or *womanism*-seen in the development of her characters. (148). The **Stillborn** offers Li enough conviction to put up with the marriage institution in the face of all its shortcomings whereas **The Descendants** does not afford such simplistic conclusions. The women here are rather too militant and deeply engrossed in their career pursuits without any mind for the sacredness of neither marriage nor paying a hoot to the ethics of culture.

In **The Descendants**, the gospel is against early marriages and the attendant Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) among other ills that have been perpetrated against women. The examples of irresponsible husbands like Lawan Dam who abandons Seytu after damaging her is quite pathetic which does indeed call for drastic action against such miscreants. Alkali does not actually have the amount of bitterness and open hatred of the men- folk in her narration as does other feminists like Buchi Emecheta, whose female characters are non conformists and deviants to all woman-bending dogmas. Mama in "the Cobweb" is "described as destabilized," hardly known by her children, while Hawwa Seytu's daughter is quite removed from the mother. The point one could make of such is that marriage, children and self-development are not "mutually exclusive" (133).

Feminist criticism focuses on the African woman; her plight on economic dependence, marriage and motherhood which writers think is "the test of feminism" (Olubukala, 17) and (or) what others call "reactive radicalism". A case in point is Seytu's decision to walk out of her marriage just because her husband decided to add another wife. In the words of Ojinmah and Egya, Seytu's action is:

Radical and affirmative, a clear indication that the new woman in Alkali's fiction is prepared, if need be, to discountenance both marriage and any traditional institution that is inhibitive to her self-realization. Seytu particularly abnegated male protection and determined to be resourceful and self-reliant. (154)

The traumatic experience of female characters portrayed in Buchi Emecheta's novels and other feminist writers is a direct consequence of the society's attitude with its chauvinistic tendencies and permissiveness. The entrenched irresponsibility in those men makes them inhuman and insensitive towards the "aches and pains" of the woman in such fiction, so much so that the groaning of her womb does not move him to positive action.

Alkali's role as a crusader and emancipator certainly appears radical in the clear sense of its total rejection of the female dependence on man. In effect, she attempts the "reversal of all inherited attributes that have become ingrained as a male preserve". This is typified by Seytu's decision to walk out of a shifting marriage without a glance (Ojinmah, 159). Through her grand conception the prospects of polygamy seem to have dwindled lately. She caught the image of an outgoing woman who knows what is good for her and others around her, and not the type of woman kept behind curtains in Harlem's of kings to be called at the kings bidding.

Conclusion:

Feminists have undoubtedly made meaning intellectual impact on the status of women in society. Commenting on the role played by female writers, Abdullahi Mohammed in an article titled "Nigerian Female Writers and National Development" admits that

women writers have performed remarkably well in all genres of literature. He however, laments the society's attitude toward them in the following lines:

Women writers in Nigeria have not found the job of creating a simple exercise and the reasons are quite obvious. One of these is that they must be seen as home keepers as mothers and wives and yet must strive to perfect their art in order not to be swept aside by the tides and time (2000:153)

The efforts made by feminists in their literature and the political "shaking" by women liberation movements have without doubt contributed positively toward the woman question. Alkali's fiction fits into the mainstream feminists writers. Her fiction occupies a special position in the nation's literature being a pioneer feminist voice from the North. Her Islamic background, which she features, is in ardent need of her type of approach-the education of woman is necessary because of the strictures of the culture on her. In **Descendants**, she appears to bear a religious burden on the plight of the oppressed and abandoned woman, who is economically enslaved.

She deploys education as a multi-dimensional emancipating liberator to outlaw all inhibitive cultures and traditions in the north and the nation at large. It is clear thus that Alkali's work appear propagandist, in that consciousness rising among a people always tend to bear the mark of urgency and has a clear sense of directness to real life. The "realness" in her quest for this change is evident in the representational urgency she employs in transforming her heroines into radicals as in the Mamas and Seytus. The posture here clearly corresponds with Stegemen's submission in an article titled, "The Divorce Dilemma: The new woman in contemporary African novel," which opines that *the new woman* rebels against traditionalism as an independent entity, where she is "defined by her experiences rather than kinship relatives where she has responsibility to realize her potentials for happiness" (90).

Alkali's **Descendants** exhibits her belief in the freedom and independence of the woman. Her departure from Li's plight and the initial resolution of the conflict brings her into the centre of the feminist saga. Ogunbiyi observe that Alkali's conclusion is based on her resolution to delve into radical feminism which creates societal deviants. The absence of major landmarks that border on what Ogunbiyi calls "meaningful reunion between women and black children" goes to establish this point:

... Un radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black children... it is also interested in communal well being thus extending its ideology toward a Marxist praxis. (65)

Since Alkali's woman has undergone a radical change, there is no apparent point of reunion between the sexes any more. They are presented, as professionals working at par with each other-as seen in both Hawwa and her mother Seytu's choice professions- initially the sole reserves of men now inhabited by women. By this stance, Acholonu observes that Alkali's fiction may be on its way to Emecheta's "avant garde" solution.

The dazzling achievement of feminists in their art ought to be appreciated, especially the pioneering multi-dimensional crusade of Alkali in the northern part of the country. It is from such literary exploits that ideas spring to attract solutions for the woman question, leading to an enhanced position of the woman in society. Although opinions differ on solution to the problem, but the universality of woman marginalization is not in doubt. There is however, consensus on the idea that no matter the type of deprivation the woman may be passing through, a solution is best attained through self-development by way of education and economic empowerment. Radical feminism may actually be saying:

African women must not play the traditional roles associated with cultural continuity, but face the challenge of the new world expanding the social, political, occupational and economic opportunities of women beyond the traditional roles of motherhood and housekeeping Molemodile (55)

Feminists do not seem to be begging for these liberties, they are simply insisting on taking them as their right. Alkali, like other feminists writers have identified education as a crucial liberating force" for all her female characters. Her ignorance and illiteracy as destructive agents of backwardness and degradation as they expose humanity to mysterious deaths as portrayed in the loss of lives at Ramta and the record of deaths in the hospital.

The direction of Alkali's fiction is quite unpredictable at this stage more so as her innovative tendencies leans toward new surprises. Not only is it too early to predict, but is also problematic. The echo of the much criticized Emecheta's "erotic freedom" and what one may term a moral virus through the employment of promiscuity shortly after Li's liberal posture tend to becloud critical perspective. Although women have experienced a lot of indescribable inhumanities in marital associations with their husbands, but feminists may not actually succeed in defending how a person engaged in moral battle of breach of trust would in turn pick same to use. The legal maxim suffices to remind them of its futility, "He who comes to equity must come with clean hands."

The Descendants is however not a novel to forget in time, the character portrayal of Magira Milli as a matriarch smacks of sublimity, as well as the brilliant blending of her people's speech idiom with English language. It does appear awkward sometimes especially for people outside her milieu, but this may be one of the best ways to convey a people's mind in English. The occasional direct use of vernacular is attempted to bring the message to the understanding of her immediate audience as well as the usual art tool for character development. The strong willed Seytu is an enigma that cannot be resisted.

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