



Wind from the West: Option for Female Individuality In Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants*

Anthonia I. Umoren

Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria

E-mail: toniainyang29@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

“She knew education is the master key to opportunities for a better life. Education opens doors and gives an individual option in life...” (13-14)

This paper which christens Education as the fair ‘wind from the west’ in defining individuality across the gender divide, specifically targets the female gender in Alkali’s *The Descendants*. The above quotation from Zaynab Alkali’s *The Descendants* unfolds insistence and consistence of female individuality as the hallmark of feminist writing. It envisions a focus and a belief in a cause. It also toes the Hardian line of firmly pursuing life’s philosophy rather than wallowing in the existing realities. Little wonder Alkali’s *The Descendants* (2005) written about three decades after *The stillborn* (1984), her first novel, is the novelist’s most ambitious literary effort. This latest literary creation in a two-hundred and thirty-five paged prose form encapsulates and insists on the novelist’s earlier themes of self-actualisation through education. Alkali’s belief in the potency of education as a vehicle into other worlds especially for the female gender is heightened in the novel in view with an added dimension of petitioning heaven (through Magira Mill’s prayer) for the answer. The author advocates gender equity through strong female characterisation. She establishes that the individually assertive woman’s world does not mean ‘a world without men’ but rather a world of peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

INTRODUCTION

Education which is the best option for defining female individuality is a strong wind that blows through Zaynab Alkali’s *The Descendants*. Toeing the Feminist’s line, Alkali who has been given a voice through education, advocates same to all her ‘descendants especially the female gender. It could

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be recalled that feminism directs her energy against the sexist's tragedy of female oppression and marginalization in all its ramifications.

Education is a human right, hence, a woman-right. Commenting on the need for education for all its citizenry under the Universal Basic Education (UBE), Obanya (2000) and Anyanwu (2000) opine that education 'equips individuals with requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes that may enable them to live meaningful and fulfilling lives in their communities.'

Again, the specific objectives of education according to the Federal Government of Nigeria's Blue Print for Education especially as it affects the UBE, is summed up in the wholistic development of both gender to function effectively in his or her environment. Feminism in general and Alkali in particular is a torch bearer and a strong advocate of the Federal Government of Nigeria Blue Print (1991) on Education. This is a major contribution of literature to national development.

The Descendants and education

In *The Descendants*, Alkali edits the cultural domination of Africans in general and women in particular through her characterization and use of local images. Aji, Lawani Ramta, Abbas, Abdulai, Magira Milli, Seytu, Madu Chumba, Dala, etc.; Dam, Zuwa, Madara, Bundi, Ngulde, Makulpo, etc. are the names of some of the major characters and villages in the text respectively. Thematically, *The Descendant's* (2005) explores many issues that confront the woman in the society using her immediate society for illustration, that is, Northern Nigeria. Some of the issues are:

- The emancipating role of education
- Equity for the girl-child
- Independence (socio-economic, political)
- Freedom of choice for the woman
- The place of marriage in the life of a woman

Education helps the woman, the girl-child to acquire a different world view with its liberalizing influence. This helps her to overcome the inhibitive cultural and social issues. Education is thus for consciousness raising and perception changing. Again, like her earlier works, marriage and childlessness in particular is a site of contention with the woman as the victim:

Meramu ... nursed a hurt in her heart. All those years, she had been unable to give Mallam Isa a child. On the advice of Magira Milli, her step-mother, she had with a woman's persuasion convinced Mallam Isa to come to Makulpo to seek care for her infertility... (7)

Education makes Meramu to ravel to Makulpo Hospital to seek proper medical advice rather than the advice of a native doctor. This search pays off

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when at the age of sixty years; Mallam Isa has a baby by her (197). Alkali's pen lends strength to Meramu, who though at the age of fourteen years is contracted in marriage to Mallam Isa who is twenty-four years older than her, but makes her wield an incredible influence in the union. *The Descendants* records that Mallam Isa's 'first wife, tired of waiting, had long obtained a divorce and married another man' (7). That the two women married to Mallam Isa are "infertile", interrogates the 'fertile' other. From the foregoing, it is evident that the 21st century women in the text in view have broken off from the angel-in-the-house figure (which) patriarchal marriage dictates to her) and taken some other self-fulfilling choices, of divorce or seeking proper medical advice in order to address her problems. Thanks to Education!

The Descendants has quite a catalog of a mismatch coupling in the name of marriage which is a far cry from marital self-actualization for the woman. This is manifested in older men marrying much younger women and the consequent dying and leaving huge responsibilities for them. This is typified by the relationships of Mero and Usman:

The very young woman, not yet fifteen, looked severely emaciated, but it was the elderly husband who was actually the patient. Usman's stomach was badly distended, his limbs spindly, and he walked as though pregnant. He was so much in pain that the taciturn wife, Mero was constantly by his side. Mero was a highly composed young woman and worked harder than anybody else in the household. She always had bags under her eyes, which made her look older than she actually was ... (9)

Yet another major character in the novel, is Magira Milli, a grandmother, a matriarch whose descendants the text periscopes. Though she is of an older generation, she knows the value of education but had no opportunity. She is highly focused and knows what she wants especially for her daughters. She does not hide her dislikes and likes, For instance, she "disliked" loud boisterous men with a passion. She has always maintained that there is profound emptiness in a man that makes a lot of stupid noises' (12). She also truly "abhorred the idea of interrupting Peni's education to be married to a man in what she described as the "meat business" (12).

Alkali's philosophy is expressed in Magira Milli, the strong, insistent voice of womanhood on the liberating power of education:

The least she (Magira Milli) could do for them was to encourage them to go to school. That way, later in life, they could make the choice on their own ... Magira Milli may be a yesterday's woman, but she was a wise one, not blind to the changes in the society ... she was a good listener who constantly turned in to her small 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

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an individual option in life. She may have missed those options, but she wanted those options for her grandchildren' (13).

The last quotation is a strong and a deep revelation of the long-sightedness, selflessness, love of the woman, to impact her generation and those unborn positively. There is also a strong indication that a woman has a clear vision of what she wants whether educated or not. However, education is an added and a highly invaluable advantage.

The last quotation also reveals that there are options in life, and that the choices that are made from the options available makes or mars a person. The wisdom of the right choice of education as the catalyst for socio-cultural and political emancipation is reposed in *The Descendants*. *The Descendants* is thus a celebration of the woman as the custodian of wisdom for survival. The woman is, thus, the gender with the sixth sense.

The woman highlighted by Alkali in *The Descendants* is the burden bearer "weighed down by enormous responsibility" (13). The weights notwithstanding, they are resilient, persevering, loving, caring and focused. Little wonder, the book opens with the great matriarch's [Milli's] entrance into Ramta (the society of the novel), and ends with her exit from Ramta. It is with her ever seeing eyes the audience sees the answers to her prayers manifest in her children who acquire skills in various professions and are highly successful. "Magira Milli has for ages commanded everyone in the house. She was the field mar shall ..." (124-125). Besides, Milli is economically buoyant and independent. Milli Seytu, Peni, Binta, Mero and Meramu are very strong women who are the life wire of their homes. Alkali endows them with longevity; for, both Meramu and Binta Yawanki are pretty old themselves in their seventies (219) despite the huge family responsibilities on their shoulders.

Magira's prayers for her children especially the female ones are answered through education. Her children become Professors, Nurses and other professionals – these are products and fruits of her labour. She enjoys the fruits of her labour before her death in the last page of the novel.

Alkali's woman has thus ridden through education, transcended the imputed female attributes of "formlessness, passivity, insatiability, confinement, piety, materialism, compliancy ... the shrew and the witch (Elbnam, 1989). Alkali in the *Descendants* corroborates Woolf's (1975) stance in the following claims of the woman, that:

She was intensely sympathetic.
She was intensely charming.
She was utterly unselfish.
She excelled in the difficult arts of family life.
She sacrificed herself daily.

In conclusion, Alkali in this paper has insisted that education is the strong and fair 'wind from the west' for individual self-actualisation and much more

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so for the woman. She prays through her heroine, Magira Milli for our girls and women to ride above oppressive patriarchal tides through education... For, most of the wars fought at various levels of our society are as a result of ignorance, and if any nation thinks, education is too costly, let it try ignorance.

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