

THE 21ST CENTURY NORTHERN NIGERIAN WOMAN AND CHALLENGES OF WOMANHOOD: A READING OF ZAYNAB ALKALI'S *THE INITIATES*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of the woman character in Zaynab Alkali's novel, The Initiates (2007) from feminist perspective. The paper discovers that Alkali's The Initiates represents a 21st century northern Nigerian woman who lives above the challenges of cultural subjugations such as early marriage, denial of education and patriarchal/societal non recognition of the woman because of her sex. In the woman's efforts to equip herself and build a strong northern Nigerian society, she strives to become strong, highly educated and asserts herself. Avi Dayyan, also, studies hard to become a geologist and subsequently works hard and becomes a Director in an oil company and serves her community positively. On the final note, the paper suggests that for the northern Nigerian region to excel in the highly competitive 21st century world, more of fictional representations of dynamic and resilient heroines such as Alkali's Avi Dayyan are needed to serve as role models for the young northern Nigerians - male and female alike.

Introduction

African literature in English language which emerged and became recognized in the 1950s was a male-created and male-

oriented art. The male African writers rarely acknowledged in their creative arts, the plight of the African women, let alone explore their fears and pains in their writings. The African women suffered in silence several degrees of injustice in the form of oppressions, marginalization and other traumatic experiences associated with being female. whether as a daughter, wife or mother, the African woman is not free of man's battering at the slightest provocation. Cases of forced marriages of girls to men sometimes old enough to be their grandparents are common throughout Africa. In Nigeria, like elsewhere in Africa, the literary world was male dominated from the 1950s up to the middle of the 1960s. Ogunyemi describes Nigerian literature as "phallic, dominated by male writers and critics who dealt exclusively with male characters and male concerns, naturally aimed at predominantly male audience" (60). Schipper also sees Nigerian literature as a "male heritage" (35). Pioneer modern Nigerian male writers such as Cyprian Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe, explore themes of male interest in their pioneer novels and situate women in uncomplimentary roles. Cyprian Ekwensi presents his lead character Jagua Nana as a prostitute in a novel of the same title. Similarly, Chinua Achebe presents women in his pioneer novel *Things Fall Apart* as either docile house wives or priestess such as Chielo, who mediates between the deities and human beings.

However, the efforts of religious and professional women's movements and organizations such as Catholic Women's Organisation (CWO), Muslim Sisters Organisation (MSO), Market Women Association, National Council of Women Societies (NCWS) and Nigerian Association of Women

Journalists (NAWOJ), to mention but a few, influenced by the blatant oppression that women suffered in both traditional and modern African society, in general and Nigeria in particular, culminated in the emergence of female writers in Nigeria. Consequently, Flora Nwapa ventured into the Nigerian literary scene in 1966 with her first novel *Efuru*, which attempted to correct the image in which the earlier male writers had portrayed women. Nwapa in an article entitled 'Women and Creative Writing in Africa' writes that what she tried to do in her work was to ". . . project a more balanced image of African womanhood. Male authors understandably neglect to point out the positive side of womanhood. . ." (527).

Since the publication of Nwapa's *Efuru* in 1966, according to Ogunyemi, female concerns have become a relevant aspect of Nigerian literature (61). With the 'floodgates' opened, several other female writers have emerged and immediately focus on the predicament and the precarious situation of women as imposed by the society. Women novelists such as Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta and Lola Shoneyin have become part of the Nigerian literary culture. These women writers always write about women and issues that concern women, and in most cases to correct the negative image created of women by the male writers. The entry of the women writers into the literary scene is one positive feature of Nigerian literature. The women writers have successfully carved out a 'spacious creative room' of their own through their various robust ways in negotiating a powerful voice for

women, to correct the negative perception of women in both the male fictional world and the society.

Therefore, most of the women novelists focus on the physical and negative nature of the presentation of the female character in Nigerian novel genre. In their various efforts, the female writers try to recreate the experiences of women in the traditional Nigerian society. Women's social and economic activities and their preoccupation with the problems of procreation, marriage, infertility, and child rearing are given prominence in the women writers' fictional narratives. The major theme in their narratives has been women emancipation and liberation from the clutches of tradition and religion. In this regard the Nigerian female writers can be described as united in their advocacy against the subjugation of the Nigerian, and indeed the African woman.

However, in northern Nigeria only a few female writers have appeared on the English language literary scene. There has not been much progress made in the region. Therefore, over the years Zaynab Alkali has remained to date the dominant voice in women writings in the region. Since the publication of her award winning novel *The Stillborn* in 1984 which according to Koroye "marked a major new talent" (47), Alkali has dominated the northern Nigerian women's English language literary landscape. Yakubu describes Zaynab Alkali as a woman coming from a region that is not adequately represented in the English language fictional world, a region still holding firmly to the ethos and values of a patriarchal order of life (27). Alkali's northern Nigeria is mostly a patrilineal society with Islam as the dominant religion. Hence, Ibrahim (2014) notes that the region is "strongly influenced

by Islamic norms and values” (336). The region’s deep rooted Islamic culture makes it very hard to delineate clearly where tradition stops and religion begins. Furthermore, in northern Nigerian society the male is superior to the female whose responsibilities, again according to Ibrahim (2012) “are tied to the home” (282). In Alkali’s northern Nigeria also, the male is mostly seen as the breadwinner and this ensures the woman’s continual obedience and loyalty. These cultural limitations on the woman and the hierarchical relationships which form the oppressive social structures are the major themes in Alkali’s work that seek to present issues affecting the woman in northern Nigeria and the odds constraining the efforts of the woman to self and communal development.

Since 1984 Zaynab Alkali has written five works of creative fiction. Her published works include: *The Stillborn* (1984); *The Virtuous Woman* (1986); *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997); *The Descendants* (2005); and recently *The Initiates* (2007). These works are all novels, with the exception of *The Cobwebs and Other Stories* which is a collection of short stories. In all her works, including the collection of short stories, Alkali uses the novelistic tradition to portray the northern Nigerian woman as she exists in what Ajima calls a society that is enmeshed in a traditional patriarchal way of life (61).

To narrate her stories, Zaynab Alkali uses the standard elements of the novel and short story forms such as plot, characters, setting, themes, point of view and narrative techniques. This paper shall examine how Alkali presents one of these standard elements of the novel –the character. In all her novels, Alkali uses the character element to provide an

insight into the nature of existence of the woman in northern Nigerian communities. The intent of this paper is therefore to examine the northern Nigerian woman as represented in Zaynab Alkali's latest novel: *The Initiates* (2007).

The Initiates is set in the imaginary village of Debro but with other actions happening in towns similar to those in Alkali's preceding novel *The Descendants* (2005), such as Gamma, Garpella and Makulpo. The novel focuses on Batanncha's family, a respected and prosperous member of Debro community, where Christianity and Islam reside; and "traditional culture and communion with nature have a strong hold" (*Initiates* 1-2). The status of the Batanncha family is largely due to the fact that its fortunes affect considerably the rising or declining prosperity of the entire community. The Batanncha family has distinguished itself owing to the fact that it has produced children who have become marvels of the community. One of the distinguished Batanncha's children is Colonel Samba. His position in the government has been source of pride not only to his immediate and extended family members, but the entire Debro community who benefit from his generosity.

Other children of the Batanncha family are Salvia and his twin-sister Avi Dayyan who also give the family additional pride; as Salvia and Avi Dayyan serve their community in their respective ways. Salvia leaves his post as an accountant in the Federal Ministry of Finance in Garpella, and returns to Debro. While in Debro he initiates the "Youth Vanguard" which improves the life of the community through the building of culverts, filling of potholes on the road, digging of water holes and supplying furniture and books to schools in

the community. On the other hand, Avi Dayyan, also known as Avi Di, is a representative of a new womanhood who engages herself with her job as a geologist in one of the leading oil companies, and helps her community by “picking babies from the gutter and bringing them up all by herself” (*Initiates* 31).

At the opening of the novel the reader is faced with a growing fear and anxiety that grip the Batanncha family over a rumour going round in the village, about Colonel Samba’s involvement in a plot to overthrow the corrupt government. The penalty in the event of a failed coup attempt is death. It is on this basis that the family is anxious and thus a growing perplexity of a father divided between the need to dig deep into the rumour with a view to discovering the truth or to remain indifferent, in which case risk the peril and sordid eventualities that inaction may likely cause. Time comes when the secret could no longer be kept. When ultimately the rumour becomes widespread, Batanncha consults his friends and resolves to send someone to the city, to ascertain the facts about his son. Consequently, Barka, Salvia and Bako are sent to the city with the mission to investigate and uncover the riddle about Samba’s involvement in the alleged coup, and his condition at the hands of his captors before he is court-martialled or executed.

At the end of the novel the coup succeeds and subsequently the government is overthrown and replaced with a democratic one. The new government releases all political prisoners and pardons those in exile including Colonel Samba. Finally Samba, after six years in exile, Salvia and Avi Dayyan return to Debro as celebrities and “illustrious

children” of the community (*Initiates* 168). Salvia is chosen by the community to contest as a Governor of Ramta Rahi State in the forth coming elections, and Avi Dayyan is promoted to the rank of Director in the oil company she works. Batanncha once again becomes a happy man especially for the planned marriages of Salvia to Nina, and Avi Dayyan to Brigadier-General Hussein.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is feminism. Feminist scholars have come up with different types of ‘feminisms’ just as there are different analyses (by feminists) of the causes of gender inequalities. The most frequently cited are Liberal, Socialist (or Marxist), and Radical perspectives. However, an area of similarity in all feminist doctrines is that they are all aimed at sensitizing women to win greater equality with men. Patricia notes that “Feminism seeks a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has hitherto been denied them by dominant (male) culture” (9). Therefore the common factor of all feminist perspectives is gender consciousness. That men and women should be equally treated politically, economically and socially. Thus feminism revolves around proving that the difference between the two sexes is nurtured and not natured. Therefore feminism attempts to change the socially constructed and nurtured idea created in gender, as opposed to those made in nature. For the purpose of this study, textual feminism that is based on the narration of women’s lives and their textual representations shall be adopted. Textual representation of women has been receiving the

attention of literary scholars. In Usman's examination of gender discrimination in African male fictional works she asserts that the plot of *Things Fall Apart* is structured in such a way that patriarchy reigns supreme and women are only qualified as "men's acquisition. As wives, they come in multiple numbers sandwiched between yam barns and titles...." (157). Similarly, in her description of the depiction of women in Armah's novel of Africa's socio-political criticism *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Usman observes that women are represented as "exploiters... attackers, greedy, mysterious, mad, selfish and above all narrow minded" (157). However, Freedman's assertion that "the issue is whether there can be ... any "reality" independent of its representation, and hence, whether any representation could be a neutral record of that reality.... Practices of representation are said to interpret the reality they represent" (307) is worth noting here. Therefore, Alkali's representation of Avi Dayyan in her latest novel can be said to suggest the reality of a northern Nigerian woman's life in the 21st century.

Avi Dayyan: The 21st Century Northern Nigerian Woman

Unlike Alkali's previous novels, *The Stillborn* (1984), *The Virtuous Woman* (1986) and *The Descendants* (2005) which are solely feminist fictions, *The Initiates* combines feminist and political concerns. The novel can therefore be seen as Alkali's attempt at crossing over the fence, for the first time, to explore the possibilities of political fiction combined with the more accustomed concerns of her earlier discussions of the woman question. Hence, even though women actually feature in *The Initiates*, the central focus and

major actions of the novel revolve around men. The women who feature in the narrative are preponderantly portrayed as mothers, wives, sisters or daughters, who find their bearing largely in their relations with men as sons, husbands, brothers or fathers even at the point of asserting their individuality. Female characters such as Yamusa and Yelwa remain docile housewives whose views and opinions are not consulted by their husband on an important issue concerning Samba. Similarly, the elderly Mama Tata remains a gossipy character who visits the Batannchas to eavesdrop. However, one woman, Avi Dayyan stands out in the novel. Unlike her mother, Yelwa who has a sense of humour and gentle femininity, Avi Dayyan is “tough-looking and serious most of the time” (*Initiates* 72). Avi Dayyan is portrayed as a woman who asserts herself and shuns tradition by not marrying at an early age and instead concentrates on her profession as a Geologist - a profession that is considered to be male exclusive preserve. Avi Dayyan’s concentration on her work in an oil company as a Geologist takes her to the top of her career. But in spite of Avi Dayyan’s success, Mama Tata who represents tradition considers Avi Dayyan a failure in Batanncha’s family.

Mama Tata holds the traditional opinion that encourages every woman to marry and bear children in order to express her womanhood to the full. Therefore, in Mama Tata’s limited world view, a woman’s destiny is only fulfilled through marriage and motherhood and nothing else. According to her “job is not everything” and she further asks “Why do today’s women think that a job covers everything?” (*Initiates* 66). But Salvia reasons that: “Avi Dayyan had a very

responsible job as a Geologist in an oil company, but because she was a woman and unmarried, Tata had refused to acknowledge her contributions” to the family and the community (*Initiates* 41). Avi Dayyan’s position as a Geologist in an oil company helps her to play a very important role in the family. For instance she is allowed to participate in the search for her elder brother Samba, because according to Salvia “she already knows the situation and as a woman, she will be allowed in places a man may not” (*Initiates* 86). Avi Dayyan’s participation alongside the men in the search for Samba in the city shows the coming of age of the 21st century northern Nigerian woman and the acceptance of her abilities by her family and society. Avi Dayyan here proves the popular saying that ‘what a man can do a woman can do even better’. Batanncha believes in Avi Dayyan’s ability and commitment towards the effort to free Samba. Therefore in his efforts to know the fate of Samba, Batanncha “All of a sudden, . . . turned to Dayyan. ‘What did they say my son did? . . . Did he kill someone? Did he steal money from the government?’” (*Initiates* 83). And when Avi Dayyan comes from the city with some news about Samba “The old man inclined his head toward Avi Dayyan and listened attentively. Often nodding or shaking his head appropriately, his eyes gleamed with pride and a certain amount of respect” (*Initiates* 70). Batanncha’s nodding and shaking of his head while listening to his daughter, Avi Dayyan, with “certain amount of respect” further indicates, again, the patriarchal acceptance and recognition of the 21st century northern Nigerian woman as a useful member of the family. Avi Dayyan contributes in taking care of Samba’s family in their time of need especially when

Samba's wife Augustina, the Calabar woman, returns to the village with some of the children and leaves the older ones in the city under Avi Dayyan's care. She combines the roles of motherhood and fatherhood in bringing up the children. Avi Dayyan is strong enough to take on these responsibilities of loving, protecting and counseling in turns. Avi Dayyan, like Li in Alkali's *The Stillborn*, therefore becomes 'the man of the house' in Samba's family during his absence.

Furthermore, Alkali's portraiture of the woman in the character of Avi Dayyan teaches women that in the midst of their career pursuits and search for solid edifices on which to construct their future lives, they should keep the men and society at bay until time is auspicious. This accords very well with the Hausa proverb that says "*Ba a gudu ana susar takash*" which means "two nuts cannot be cracked at a time". With this realization, therefore, Avi Dayyan exploits to the fullest, the liberal leanings of her father, Batanncha, who, unlike Li's in *The Stillborn* or Peni's and Seytu's uncle, Aji Ramta in *The Descendants*, is not meddling in his children's marriages. Unlike the time when the choice of partners was exercised by parents on behalf of their daughters and sometimes for their sons; Batanncha allowed his son Samba, a Muslim from the north to marry Augustina, a Christian from the south. With Batanncha as a father, Samba and Salvia as brothers, Avi Dayyan is also spared the trauma not only of premature marriage but also that of hanging on to a partner other than her choice. When the time comes for her to marry Avi Dayyan is insightful and calculative in her choice of a husband. She chooses a man who is not only an achiever, a Brigadier General, but someone already close to her family as

a life-long associate. Avi Dayyan's marriage to Brigadier General Hussein at an advanced age gives her the desired stamina to confront the cultural and religious conflicts that may be used to subjugate her as a wife just as is the case with Efuru in Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Ramatoulaye in Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981).

Furthermore, Avi Dayyan is committed to the well-being of her community. Her commitment is evident in her love for children, especially abandoned children. She goes around picking babies from the gutter and bringing them up (*Initiates* 31). Avi Dayyan runs a kind of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that focuses on the welfare of abandoned children in the community. However, unlike most Nigerian NGOs that rely heavily on external support, Avi Dayyan's project is solely funded through her earnings as a geologist. This image of the woman who decides the turns in her life is Alkali's idea of empowering and representing the 21st century northern Nigerian woman, different from the earlier representations of women characters in African male authored novels and African women novels, to attain the optimal within the northern Nigerian society. Avi Dayyan is poised to serving her people and making a difference. In the freedom Alkali accords Avi Dayyan in *The Initiates*, there is an expression of the principles of empowerment for the woman, similar to what Sani sees as very important in women's rights to self-determination and "control over their personal and social lives" (233), as also unfettered access to opportunities which make the self-determination possible.

Conclusion

The Initiates presents Avi Dayyan's efforts to disregard her traditional society's expectations of a woman. In Avi Dayyan's society women are only expected to remain veiled and build a career in marriage and child bearing, but not in office work that is culturally regarded as a taboo as expressed by Mama Tata. Avi Dayyan opposes the cultural aspects that subjugate the 21st century woman such as early marriage. Instead of marrying at an early age she concentrates on her work. Her education and position equip her, as a 21st century woman, with the necessary strength and fore-sight to help not only herself and her immediate family but the society at large. She is furthermore respected and recognized by the society and her father who represents patriarchy.

Therefore, in a society such as the northern Nigerian, where the men are considered as the only sex endowed with humanity, the women must possess adequate strength, initiative and education to 'make their mark' in the society. The status of the northern Nigerian women can be improved and put in appropriate positions in the society alongside the men, as equal partners united in bringing progress to their society. Nigerian women writers, therefore, need to present female protagonists rather than female characters that submit to the subjugation of womanhood through marriage, child bearing, cultural and religious inhibitions. The presentation of strong female character, such as Avi Dayyan, in Alkali's most recent novel, will contribute in changing the society's perception of women as weak and unable to assert their rights and protest against all forms of cultural oppressions and injustices. Furthermore, northern Nigerian writers, both

men and women, should realize that for any society to transform positively there must be dynamism and change within that society. There is need for change in the age-old stereotyped attitudes and representations that hinder the progress of women.

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