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# DISMANTLING THE HEDGE OVER FEMALE HEALTH IN ZAYNAB ALKALI'S NOVELS: A READING OF THE DESCENDANTS

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to identify the traditional norms and mores in Alkali's fiction that inhibit the female gender from the realisation of their individual and collective aspirations in Northern Nigeria. Northern Nigeria is a hegemonic society guided by a culture of strict observance of the Islamic religion's ethic. Some of these norms are set to check the women mostly. They restrict their movement, binding them into marriages at very early ages, without their consent, and under unhealthy and unacceptable conditions in this contemporary society. Zaynab Alkali identifies these obnoxious religious and cultural norms in her novels, and advances diverse solutions to them. These solutions are advocacy for equal educational opportunities for women, nullification of polygamous practices as enshrined in the Holy Koran, and conferment of the Right to individual freedom and association. These philosophies are most succinctly enunciated in her third novel, *The Descendants* that establishes a revolutionary trait in Magira Milli, the heroine and matriarch of the Ramja dynasty. Magira Milli stands against these cultural precepts, and achieves positive results; educates her grand children, both male and female in the lineage and community at large.

## Introduction

Zaynab Alkali's latest novel *The Descendants* is a corpus to make a triad in her persistent push to give voice to the silenced multitude of her compeers and compatriots in her Muslim-dominated Northern Nigeria. This novel represents the culmination of her ideological focus on female assertiveness and independence, began in her earlier two novels *The Virtuous Woman* and *The Stillborn*. The marriage tradition in her socio-cultural milieu circumscribes the female gender's mobility and sense of intellect. Furthermore, it limits their freedom of choice, and estranges them in the decision-making processes in their homes, even in matters that affect them directly. However, in order to redress this untoward condition, we see Alkali present a conflict situation between Li and her father early in *The Stillborn*, giving voice and the desired sense of judgment to Li, when Li's "... piercing eyes stripped him naked and saw his soul; assessing, judging and condemning him, weighing his strength against his weakness" (9). At this juncture, Baba's patriarchal ego and pride has been deflated, "... and ended up feeling like a fool" (9) before his little daughter.

Nana Ai in *The Virtuous Woman* is also representative of the womanhood that is desired in contemporary times, with the heavy dross on moral sanctity. Alkali presents her that "... she bore herself with utmost dignity, thus endearing herself to many people. Someone once remarked that Nana Ai had a maturity that was conspicuously absent in her age-mates" (11).

In her latest novel *The Descendants*, Alkali clearly comes out as an indisputable feminist author in her handling of several issues that border on female autonomy and assertiveness. She re-defines her perceived Womanist concept of marriage as presented in Li's return to Habu Adams in *The Stillborn*, and establishes plausible feminist's assertive characters that scorn and chide the patriarchal monotonous hold on what determines a blissful marriage. It is also in this novel that Alkali creates the male characters of a woman's dream. She shocks the female aesthetic with a whole new configuration of male characters usually empathic with and credible to the female cause, in the mould of Professor Zaki, Engr. Abbas and Professor Kayes. However, in *Aji Ramta*, we find the characteristic stereo-type of the feminist's writer's butt.

More appropriately, it is in this novel that Alkali moves from yesterday to today; more stringently set to make a profound statement, she achieved dual heroism in her characterization. She created two female characters that overtly represent the past and the future respectively - Magira

Milli, an octogenarian and matriarch of the Ramta dynasty cannot be dismissed just as a major character; she is a heroine and a round character. Umma Seytu, a descendant of Magira Milli is also a heroine and a round character. The entire story of the novel resolves around them.

### **The Dialectics of Alkali's Feminist's Quest in the *Descendants***

*The Descendants* is essentially the story of the Ramta Dynasty, and their quest for fulfillment through education. Magira Milli, the matriarch of the family relocates with her entire family from their Village of Ramta to Makulpo, to start a new lease of life and give her future generations a hopeful future, after Azreel, the angel of death has dealt her a serious blow, loosing four of her sons and lastly a grand son. The matriarch like Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is powered by a passion to survive, establish her family and, beyond Okonkwo's vision, live ahead of today. Education is the major forte of this vision. Alkali builds the survival quest of her characters on the post of a literacy vision; literacy as Okereke defines "is the acquisition of knowledge and education in human and individual capacities... towards the liberation of the human mind and person" (2003:63). The liberating import of a good education is the privileged ability to decipher between good and bad. It is in this guise that Alkali surmises that "the least that 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 of their own, ..." (13).

It is instructive to note that, unlike in other strictly feminine text, where advocacy is sought for the education of the girl-child only, this education is for the both gender. Alkali is emphasizing here that the entire fabric of the society deserve to change, so the process of education starts with Aji Ramta, a traditionalist and Magira Milli's only son.

Aji Ramta, becomes the patriarch of the new descendants that came in a flow to live in Makulpo. In Makulpo egged-on by his mother, he has come to know the value, and increasing power in education. He is a man "highly fascinated by the Schools and much talked about Makulpo memorial Hospital" (2) He draws his inspiration from these two Institutions and has been privileged to be among the people who work there. The book, which he attempts to read in his noisy and noisome bucolic compound, is symbolic of intellectualism he desperately seeks in the midst of suffocating ignorance. Everyone in Aji Ramta's compound is yoked with the burden of ignorance and timidity. It is to lift off this burden, that his mother courageously undertook the need to educate the people.

The crucial issue of acquiring a different world view which education "with its liberalizing influence" (Okereke, 114, cited by Ojimah) confers on its recipients is central to the actions in the novel. It is our contention that just as Achebe in *Arrow Of God* explores the dynamics of the power Ezeulu wields over the seasons and consequently over the people as Chief Priest of Ulu and allows Ezeulu's "mind never content with shallow satisfactions ..." (3), that Alkali also, through Mama in "the Cobwebs" and Aji Ramta and Seytu in *The Descendants*, is exploring to what extent education with its liberalizing influence could emancipate and extend the frontiers of freedom of the woman in dealing with inhibitive cultural and social issues.

Umma Seytu, like Alekiri in Elechi Amadi's *Estrangement* is an assertive and circumspect character; she is the product of the "consciousness awakening" School of thought. Seytu like Alekiri 'awoke' from the delirium of marital hegemony, and rose to pinnacle of a choice career, to be the Chief Medical Director (CMD) of Makulpo Memorial Hospital (MMH). It is not an uncommon fit for a woman born within a tradition that circumscribes the advancement of the female gender to go beyond the first levels of elementary stages of education. This is what Chukwuma condemns when she avers that "Women conditioning in Africa is the greatest barrier towards fulfillment of self. This is seen in the religious, socio-cultural and economic life of Women" (ix). But for Magira Millis' militant stand that all her grand children imbibe the wisdom of books, Seytu who turns out to be the succeeding Matriarch, would not have had adequate training. Seytu takes the courage of her grand mother not only in her pursuit of education, but also in her protesting psyche towards anything that constitutes a stumbling block to her progress as a person. This why she is more articulate and forthright, than Li of *The Stillborn*, in taking decisions that concern her marriage. After her misadventure into marriage although it is not her fault like Li and Alekiri, she picked the valuable option of education, more conscious and invigorated by Magira Milli's vision.

Alkali's vision of women emancipation is strengthened in the manner in which Seytu defiantly, but successfully kept the proud, but publicity-shy Yerima at arms-length, and further de-personalizes

herself from the crises of marriage. Like Amaka in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, Seytu questions whether a woman fulfillment lies only in marriage. Amaka, after about six years of unfruitful marriage interrogates the efficacy of marriage as the defining standard for the status of a woman: "was a woman nothing because she was unmarried or barren? Was there no other fulfillment for her?" (22). Like Amaka, Seytu steps out and moves on, very professionally engaged, with her head held high, to take a look at the man who lacks the principles and carriage of decent husband.

It is our considered opinion that Alkali, through Seytu's principled outburst, is holding up the institution of marriage for closer scrutiny, because it is one vital area where the relationship between the male and female gender has suffered bastardization, with the female most traumatized. This is why Helen Chukwuma contends that "the true test for the woman continues to be the marriage institution. In this closed-in arena, every married woman is to fight out her survival as an individual. The paradox in marriage lies in the fact that it is both sublimating and subsuming" (5). There is a resplendent radicalism inherent in Seytu's action in walking out on her marriage because her husband decided to add another wife. Yes! Seytu's action is radical and affirmative. It is 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 would constitute a hindrance to her self-realization.

The success story of Seytu and Hauwa, her daughter are testimonies of the fruits of education, and above all, an obvious confirmation of Professor Zaki's observation that "without a sound education, a woman has very little chance to make a success in her life" (189). This testimony serves to reaffirm the social and material benefits that are derivable from education upward social mobility, self-assertion and independence.

The characterization of Magira Milli is the pivot of Akali's revolutionary temperament in her thrust to redress the apparent spirit of docility in her women folk. She is created in the mould of Wanja in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and blind Maimouna in Sembene's *God's Bit of Wood*. They led the women in an epic march against colonial administration.

Magira, although an octogenarian, lived in modern times, conscious of contemporary developments and needs. Alkali affirms that "Magira may be yesterday's woman, but she was a wise one, not blind to changes in the society ... she was a good listener who constantly tuned-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" (13). She also changed the people of her time.

The feminist instinct in Alkali has found expression most profoundly in her present work, because she heeded the call of Akachi Ezeigbo that "... a great service would be rendered to feminism if women are re-created and re-defined they way truly are as human beings motivated like others by emotions and desires ... (54/55). Alkali created Magira Milli to redress the evils visited on her romantic Faku, and the timid and idyllic Awa in *The Stillborn*. Magira Milli wields octopal strength in the entire Ramta dynasty; defines the destiny of her grand children, just as Ezeulu defines the life of his Ulu people. In this vein, Alkali seeks to achieve a balancing here between the gender. Also in the novel, Magira's role and responsibilities give her the right over every aspect of the life of her son's family. Her very grave concern with the education of her grand children, particularly the female ones, was taken seriously by entire members of the family: "the Ramta boys had never believed in educating their girls, until now that education had suddenly become an obsession with the old woman, as if she ever went to school herself" (25/26).

Magira urges Seytu, her grand daughter to be forthright, assertive and realistic with her situations being lost and confused in the labyrinth of her marital experiences, she sought wise counsel from her grandmother. The all-knowing wise one threw back on her to learn to take responsibility for her decisions. She rebukes Seytu that "what you are actually looking for is someone who will take responsibility for your choice. You will not find that in me. Make a choice, take the responsibility and do not linger, move on" (197). What Magira is advocating for is the woman that is vibrant, and not docile and dormant; this woman surges forward, does not lingers or waits. The forward-looking and adventurous woman is the creed she aspires to establish in her children and the women folk in general.

Furthermore, in Magira Alkali confronts the institution that stifles the progress of the youth through the damnable early marriage syndrome. She rudely scorns the idea of the child-mother, and its unpalatable effects on the life of the youths, like the VVF and other related ailments. Alkali writes

that Magira Milli was grieved with her son for giving out Peni in marriage, thus punctuating her education. She avers that "... what worried the old woman ran deeper than just her grand daughter getting married to butcher .... True, she abhorred the idea of interrupting Peni's education to be married to a man in what she described as the "meat business" (12). She would have preferred a "young and aspiring" person like a teacher, doctor at Makulpo Memorial Hospital. These experiences reminded her of the damning effects of poverty and ignorance she yearns to forget. This is a life she hates with a passion, and strives to leave behind her in Ramta, the old homestead.

Alkali, Ba, Emecheta and other women writers have indicated tacitly that the environment has debilitating influence on character and the psyche, so there is a pressing need to strive to change the conditions of ones existence. If Nnuego, Amaka, Aissatou and Li had not moved into the city, they would have ended up barren, in every sense of the word. Helen Chukwuma accents to "... the going-away motif as a necessary first step to self-realization... it is also the necessary first step in a situation of overwhelming odds" (xii).

Writing against the background of physical inertia and damning silence in her culture, Alkali notes that these odds against the female gender strongly constricts the realization of the self. Alkali's stand in her novels is that her Muslim society in Northern Nigeria stifles the growth of personal identity in the female through a process of socialization, which restricts personal awareness and freedom. Thus, it becomes imperative that the only option open to her characters is to 'elope'; make advancement away from and "establish physical and psychic distance between the individual reactor and the system" (xiii).

In the *Descendants*, as in her earlier novels, Alkali displays her characteristic techniques of the journey-motif to maximum efficiency. The psychological and physical benefits of the journey on the characters can only be quantified by the value of experience. The experiences of the journey bring a new level of awareness and self-concept a journey into self-knowledge.

Magira Milli had to leave her ancestral home of Ramta to Makulpo to avert the impending catastrophe of a total elimination of her dynasty through death-death through avoidable circumstances. The new environment will also offer her grandchildren the opportunity of good education. She surmised that "the earth is spacious. She was determined to start off her grandchildren afresh" (14). The logical interpretation of her statement infers that it is only fool-hardy to stay in one spot or place for long, without veering beyond the borders. They should be an inner urge to move on and not linger; to seek greater and greener pasture.

Alkali's literary technique of journey-motif must have gained strength from her reading of Alfred Tennyson's poem 'Ulysses'. Tennyson urges us that:

Yet all experience is an arch where thro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.  
How dull it is to pause, to make an end, ... (170).

Besides the exquisite character of Magili Milli and Umma Seytu, Alkali created Yerima Gamma, the estranged husband of Seytu to explore the philandering attitude of the aristocracy in the Muslim-dominated Northern Nigeria. Yerima Gamma in all his portraiture is cut to be a gentleman, but "his lifestyle was chaotic" (146). Furthermore, "he was a bad news... up to date he had several divorces and numerous children. He had no patience and no qualms about issuing the divorce paper" (135). The pertinent question is that: Why should an irresponsible religious/political leader enjoy the right of stockpiling women, under the guise of a religious norm, and divorce them on only short notice? It begs the question on the piety of the personality. Yes! more so when he flaunts it with much arrogance.

To clearly delineate the villainy of Yeriman Gamma, Alkali juxtaposes him with Abbas Y. A., whom she indicated "had a purposeful air about him" (150). It is instructive that they were all schoolmates, with equal and same academic orientations, but the former had been debased by the obsession with aristocratic privileges. Abbas lost his wife Mero and refused to remarry immediately. This amplifies his chaste and responsible conduct that defies explanation in Islamic circles.

### Conclusion

The novel ends with Magira's death. Her character is the focal point of the plot. Alkali is at her

best in creating a character of her dream: "Magira Milli had become an institution, like an ancient monument. She had become part and parcel of Makulpo landscape" (214). Even when she becomes senile, her towering name and wisdom remains a protective shade to her descendants. They are all products of her vision, including Peni whose terrible psychic devaluation seems to be arrested at the end of the novel.

Critics of Alkali's fiction have always interpreted her earlier novels as feminist, but it is in this novel that Alkali offers a dish to feminist critics. She does this through the creation of two rounded characters, Magira and Seytu, undoubtedly conscious of their struggle to survive and move ahead of men. They are set, especially Magira Milli to positively influence and affect her society, in spite of all socio-cultural and even natural limitations.

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