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The Image of a Female Character in the African Novel: A Feminist Reading of Zaynab Alkali's "The Stillborn".

Prepared by



Asso.Prof.Dr.Khaleel Bakheet Khaleel Ismail
Department of English language and Literature,
College of Science and Humanities,
Prince Sattam ibn Abdulaziz University, KSA
k.ismail@psau.edu.sa
00966537493033

Abstract:

Over the last decades, African literary criticism has witnessed the contributions of female novelists the invigoration of the African literature; especially those female writers whose works that questioned patriarchy, women's role, household issues, and gender based discrimination in the African traditional societies. It is notices that most female writers have embraced feminism in spite of the thematic essence of their individual narratives. Thus, this paper's objective is to examine the images of female characters in Zaynab Alkali's "The Stillborn" from feminist perspective. It is a critical exploration of how Alkali's creative visions as a female writer have pinpointed some social realities which relegate womanhood to gender roles. It also explains the aesthetic value of Zaynab Alkali's works with a special attention on her idiosyncratic use of language in portraying female characters in her fictional narrative. The paper concludes that, the persistent gender inequality, patriarchy, and societal look at the female, which Alkali's works portray, have contributed in subordinating women's role in African traditional societies. Hence, Alkali however, advocates and tries to project womanhood in a positive light, by arming her female characters with intensity of visions to stand for their equal rights, speak of themselves, lead independent lives, and end up all sort of patriarchal domination.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchy, Stillborn, Womanism, Oppression, subjugation.

Introduction

The Africa fictional narrative especially novel genre nowadays reflects a variety of female images in those mostly patriarchal communities. Hence, the African novelists like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Chimamanda Adichie, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri, Altayeb Saleh and many others; make use of the African environment and landscape in depicting and presenting female characters, for the authenticity and originality of their literary productions. In fact, it is clear that African societies are predominantly masculine. However, the feminine role as represented in fictional narrative is quite dominant. In native spiritual local religions and traditional folklores; the chief goddess of Earth is quite present, such as "Mawu" the moon (female) and "Lisa", the sun (masculine) in Ewe community in Ghana. In Africa in general and West Africa in specific; people's daily routines are immensely influenced by the female deities. In most African traditional societies, although women are not paid much care, they are acknowledged as the mothers of mankind worldwide. Mother Africa is mostly described as the main source of fertility purity, divine providence and source of comfort to the clan. Moreover, some communal practices such as discrimination, family restrictions, gender based violence, subordination and social constrains on women are notably prevailing in the African patriarchal societies. On the other hand, the role of women as caretakers, teachers, and source of joy, family supporters, housekeepers and coziness providers is also glorified in their personal life. The role of the female in traditionally conservative societies is mainly running the household. Thus, this research paper intends to depict the image of female character in the African novel in general, and the West African novelist Zaynab Alkali's works; namely her novel "The Stillborn" in particular. It tries to shade light on feminist manifestation as a literary framework from different perspectives and how it has been exploited in the African narrative prose fiction.

Portrayal of Women in the African Novel:

In most African societies; especially in the rural/remote areas, women; being imbued with their spiritual experiences and knowledge usually stay in their shrines of the earth goddess and

practice traditional rituals which are believed to instill norms, traditions and social values. For instance, Flora Nwapa's (who was called mother of modern African literature) most striking guiding principles of feminism are demonstrated in her novel "The Lake Goddess" (2020). By reading this novel one will encounter Nwapa's feminine viewpoints and visions as she postulated them directly via her female characters. The feminine principal in the novel is the female character, Lake Goddess Ogbuide, who is considered the mother of Ugwuta Community. In her other novel Idu (1970), she tried to portray the main character 'Idu' submissively intimate female who believed in male's dominance. Although her husband Adiewer has interest in second marriage, she insisted on him to get a second wife. Eventually, when he gets sick, Idu takes a good care of him and nurses him tirelessly she even dies after one month after his death. In Buchi Emecheta's novel, "The Second class Citizen" (1974), the main female character Adah who is educated feels superior, and thinks that a free woman is the one who surpasses the traditional norms and live according to her own conventions. She believes that a woman is created for more than just getting married and produces children and raises them up in the custody of her husband. Again Flora Nwapa's main female character Efuru also represents woman's struggle and protest in her novel Efuru (1966). Efuru is a representation of a female character who decides to live without needing a man in her life; by breaking all her social conventions. Despite the anger and criticism of other fellow females in her community, she insists on her decision to remain as such. She tells them that, although she wants to be nurtured and maintains her culture, she intends to make a difference and to make a breakthrough of change in her society concerning female independence.

In Chinua Achebe's "*Things Fall Apart*" (1958), female character "Cheilo" is the only respected female in Umuofia village, just because she is the priestess of the oracle of the hills and the caves. That is; she is the spokesperson of the deity, and she is the only person who defies and screams at the tough main male character; the warrior Okonkwo when he makes an offense. She is the one who shouts at him as he takes his own daughter and son to the shrine:

"Beware Okonkwo!" she warned. "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!" Chapter 11 (p. 95)

In Buchi Emecheta's novel "*The Joys of Motherhood*" (1979), the female character Adaku depicts the female's resistance and struggle to set herself free from the dogmatized social restraints which causes her suffering. She does not want to have a lifelong commitment but prefers transient relations with male to get money and satisfy her desires and physical gratification. On the other hand, Nnu Ego another female character in *The Joys of Motherhood* who is portrayed as naïve girl filled with hope and ambition of the expected joys for being a mother. She has painfully struggles and sacrifices her life for rearing her children and taking care of their welfare. She measures her womanhood only by having children and raising them up. Thus, Buchi Emecheta in all her novels tries to describe and represent the female image as independent being who could stand for her rights and capable of leading a successful life.

Moreover, the main female character Esi in Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes* (1991) represents an independent working female who protests against the social stereotypical viewpoints on woman as a dependent being in her community. In Esi's point of view African woman is not born just to fulfill the role of mother, wife, daughter, whore, prostitute and a grandmother, she also fits to be a professional community leader, politician, and do whatever a man can do.

Thus, over many years; although all the postcolonial feminist literary attempts to represent female character as being independent, but the African traditional outlook at a woman has a long way to change. It is noticed that, despite the awareness of the African elites about the dynamic nature of art, this dynamism has not hastened and fostered the African fictional narrative to cope up the social norms and communal practices. The reason simply lies upon the colonial views about whatever belongs to the ancestral traditional heritage which is sometime seen as an obstacle to modernity and progress. Hence, most of the contemporary African narratives are seen through the colonial lenses.

Feminism in Literature: The Concept of Feminism

As an ideological and literary movement, it is the sociological fact that the inequality, domination and other societal ills imposed on women in our various societies that has graduated into a struggle best known as feminism. This feminism as a movement, is an ideology and socio-economic and political movement earlier dated as far as the 16th century from which we have the earlier records of females' struggle (Waziri, 1981:2 in Ismail, 1994:3)

It is now known from these records that women the world over irrespective of race, religion or times, have always struggle in one way or the other to transform their socio-political and economic position which have always been less favorable in relation to that of men. Men on the other hand have throughout history used every available weapon including the misinterpretation of religion to ensure male dominance and to keep women ignorant of their rights and responsibilities (Ismail, 1994:3)

In literary discourse it is a term used to denote the agitation for emancipation of women as they are dominated by men socially, culturally economically and politically as well, as expressed in different literary genres.

Historical Perspective of Feminism

It is obvious fact and widely recorded in literary works, especially feminist, that the first feminist manifesto was marry Wollstonecraft's vindication of the right of woman in 1792(Ibrahim 2002, Ismail 1994 etc) This indeed, marked the birth of women's writing which is formally known as feminist literature. Thus, this writing as academic discipline came into existence in 20th century. This emancipation started from the west and much later widely accepted in other places around the world including Africa. Abdul (1983 :160) says that:

Feminism has found warm acceptance in Africa especially among the highly educated women and their sympathizers. It has shaped the vision, perception and preoccupation of writers like Miriam Ba, Ama Aita Aido, Zulu sofola, Nawal el Sa'adawi, Chioma opera, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Hauwa Ali, Mairo Habibu, Maria Hamdana and Zaynab Alkali to mention but a few.

Thus, Chindaya (2012) also tries to pin point when feminism was started as a movement:

The concept of this women emancipation started with the contemporary of Jean Paul satire, a French philosopher, psychologist and poet. It was perpetuated after the French revolution and as per the revolution the

movement was spread all over the world through the colonialism and after the 1st and 2nd world wars (Chindaya 2011:209-10)

Western Feminist Theory

It is obviously fact and widely recorded in western literary works especially feminist, that the first feminist manifesto was Mary Wollstonecraft's vindication of the right of a woman in 1792 (see Ibrahim 2002, Ismail 1994 etc) this indeed marked the birth of women's writing which is formally known as feminist literature. Although, this writing as academic discipline in the west came into existence since 20th century.

To Ann and Carole (1986:707): True feminist is negating male's supremacy, protection, living an independent resourceful life. This inequality of sex is what marked the feminist struggle over centuries. This has gradually developed into a largely complex ideology and social movement that has been concerned with the basis of all forms of social domination as well as the underlying causes for inequality treatment by society.

Chodorow Nancy (1989) posits that, the feminist theory emerged from feminist movement in the west with the aim of understanding the true nature of sources of the unequal living conditions based on gender inequality to examining women's social roles and lived experience; has also set forth some interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to address issues related to social gender constructions. Thus, Churis (2007) in his *Key Issues in Post-Colonial Feminism: A western perspective*, opines that; some of the earlier forms of feminism in literary works were highly criticized because of their focus on the white western and middle class viewpoints. This trajectory and biased perspective has contributed in creating discriminatory and ethnocentric forms of feminism.

Liberal Feminist Theory

It is quite obvious that, in the ideology of the liberals; freedom is a fundamental right of the individuals in any society. Hence, liberal feminist has the same view with more emphasis on the freedom of women. In fact, there are some conflicting ideas and disagreement about the definition of freedom among the liberals, that is why the liberal feminists are of two groups: the first group are the liberal feminists who think of freedom as personal autonomy), and political autonomy (participating on creating the conditions under which one lives). The second group are the classical liberal feminists who conceive of freedom as freedom from coercive interference. As the result of these conflicting views about freedom among the two groups, there is a dispute on which group might best represent liberal feminism?

Generally, liberal feminists are of the view that, the personal and political autonomy of women is not fully acknowledged in their everyday lives, and that their basic needs and interests are not fully recognized in their living conditions; because they are inadequately represented legitimately in their quest for self-determination and self-realization. They believe that, these deficits are due to, as Okin (1989:89) names it, "the gender system". For them, it is the patriarchal system which imposed upon the social institutions and the inherited traditions which aggravated these situations. That is why women need to strive hard to first identify these deficits and uproot them.

The liberal feminism calls for protective laws that ensure the promotion of equal citizens' autonomy, and that; the state most effectively protect women from violence regardless of where

that violence takes place (Cudd 2006:85 -118, 209; Rhode 1997:1193- 95.). They consider the existence of paternalistic and moralistic laws place control over women's lives. These feminists are supporting the autonomy of women working conditions and legislative regulations that guarantee their rights and safety; (Cornell 1998:57), and (Cudd 2006:154).

Radical Feminist Theory

The basic tenant of the radical feminism resides in the idea that, patriarchy often causes women oppression; and that the male autonomous system does not only manifest itself in personal relations, sexuality and family construction, but it goes further to include all the areas of the male-domination

The term radical feminism in literary theory discourse refers to the tendency that emerged out of the civil rights movement during the 60s and up to the 80s. The main cause that contributed in getting this radical label has been the radical feminists' views about women oppression as exceeding the boundaries of ethnicity, traditional culture, and socio-economic class. The most important texts which depict the history and the fundamental views of radical feminism movement are Alice Echol's *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, (1989) and an anthology edited by Anne Koedt, entitled *Radical feminist* (1972)

Thus, it is quite obvious that radical feminism has been a bulwark of theoretical thought in feminism in general. It has laid a solid foundation for the rest of 'feminist flavors' seen by many as the "undesirable element of feminism.

On the other hand, radical feminism also of the view that men and women's differential roles have to acknowledged as well as they are supposed to be equally valued. It calls for revolutionizing and dismantling all the repressive institutions. However, Radical feminism in many critical studies has been criticized for not including some identities by focusing on some races rather than others. Thus, in her book: "Radical Feminism Writing, and Critical Agency: *From Manifesto to Modem*" Jacqueline Rhodes (2005) confirms that:

"For contemporary feminist oppositionists, it appears that radical second-wave feminism consists of consciousness-raising and a problematic tendency to universalize personal experience; in each case, radical feminism, in all its complication and division, exists only insofar as it justifies the present-tense of feminism and composition."

Social Marxist Feminist Theory

Socialist feminism is another tendency in feminism which primarily concentrates on the public and private life of women's life and tries to liberate women from the economic, social, and cultural. Social feminism theory has two lines of arguments: The Marxist feminism which focuses on the role of capitalism in women oppression, and the radical feminism which emphasize the role off gender and the patriarchy in women oppression. Finn Mackay (2015) asserts that:

"Socialist feminism is typically identified by its emphasis on how capitalism oppresses women and all other people. A key departure from radical feminism is the claim that capitalism should be seen as the world's primary oppression and that it consequently predates patriarchy. Socialist feminism (like radical feminism) frequently emphasizes the home as the fundamental site of

women's oppression, perceiving women as laborers to the laborer, drawing theory from, for instance, the significant work of Marx, Engels, and Babel. Through their caring and reproductive work, women preserve the current labor force, produce the future workforce, and serve as a reserve army of labor who may be called upon whenever and wherever needed in the formal wage economy”.

Nevertheless, Social Marxist feminists sometimes oppose and reject radical feminism's main claim about patriarchy as the only or source of females' subjugation. Believing on women's inability to financially and economically free themselves from men particularly in conservative third world communities. Therefore, they claim that for the massive necessity of socioeconomic political justice, women need to be liberated and lead their own dependent livelihood.

Social Marxist feminism claim that class relations with regard to capitalism, sociocultural and political female exploitation based socially assigned roles are the main reasons behind women's oppression. Therefore, social Marxist feminism believes that, by dismantling capitalism and disintegrating class –based society, gender based inequality will be vanished as well.

Ironically, this view has been refuted, because of the fact that in most African societies women usually play key roles in all walks of daily life, from household duties, to their participation with men in war, farming, and bringing up the children. Some studies specially which were conducted in socialist countries in the 1970s and 1980s concluded that females in these communities were subjugated and repressed and their entire lives was subordinated till recent times.

Feminism in African Literature

Generally, feminism is a literary movement that propagates political, social and economic equality of women with men and gives them privileges to seek for emancipation from such vices. Ojo-Ade, (1983:1), has this to say: “*feminism is a movement which seeks to eliminate gender inequality for the female gender socially, economically and politically*”.

However, in a more specific way, “feminism in African literature provides the African female writers the platform and opportunity with which to address the women question and how to uplift and propagate its emancipation. Womanhood is important, according to Kolawole (1997), and for African women, this is not debatable nor contentious. Therefore, they do not necessarily want to act like males or appear like guys.

African feminism theory is not like western feminist theory because Africans do have their own customs, norms, cultural traditions and beliefs of the black race, which greatly featured in their literature.

Thus, African feminism is always concerned with family affairs and marriage institution because it runs contrary to the norms and customs of their communities. These instances are clearly reflected in most African novels and other fictional genres. For example, in the Nigerian novelist Zaynab Alkali's writing it is clearly shown that, family affairs and marriage institution are held in high esteem. So, for African feminists, marriage, family construction, motherhood, childhood, women's social roles, and gender issues in general are very much important in the African literary ethnic, racial, and folkloric and tradition discourse. This is the reason that let Walker (1983) to suggests “Women Rights' theory' instead of “Womanism or Feminism”, because of the dichotomy between the European and African views or concepts; as each of them has a different

approach to the term. Moreover, Ogunyemi (1988) argues that ‘Woman Right’ theory is mostly in favor of a thorough research on the men that are proponents of feminism in such way that it will benefit both men and women.

It is noticed that despite of all kinds of feminism studies in the African literary and critical discourse, men remain the heads of their families. And that ‘women have societal roles and they also somehow authorize the society to control them in some aspects, especially when it comes to dependency, household support, protection, children discipline in addition on how to uplift and better the societal lots for the benefits of all and sundry.

African Feminist Theory

With the peculiarity of the African contexts, the African feminist theory needs not to stereotype African women as mere ‘problems to be solved’, but as human beings who are able to setup their own goals, within the confines of their traditional societies. That is why most of the African feminist like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali and others have distinctively portrayed African female character in the fictional narrative as strong, innovative agent and decision makers in their specific contexts and social environments.

Thus, the idea of “Africa and feminism theory” compared to its European counterpart has brought different debates as it puts scholars who have different theoretical and ideological backgrounds and of different classes, races, culture and experiences in a dilemma of coming to a unified conceptual meaning. Just as the African continent which is geographically of varying ethnic groups with huge diversity in all walks of life, and different colonization experiences.

African Feminism also tend to include all African descends even if they are living or raised up out of the African continent. Thus, all the strands African feminism have emerged and developed strong movements which are highly in favor of women by ascertaining their rights and solidify their great roles in all aspects of human endeavors.

Moreover, Steady (1981) seeks to reverse the western ideologies inherent in both Feminism and Womanism. She offers her theory of African Feminism to project the peculiarities of the African woman. According to her:

“Whatever one’s viewpoint, the ramifications of the feminist movement for black women are nuanced... The black woman stands out as having a different priority list for a number of reasons. She is oppressed not only because of her gender but also, for the most part, primarily, because of her ethnicity and class. Women do not constitute a general category; instead, they are members of many socioeconomic groupings. Due to the fact that many black women are low-income, there may be some alienation from the middle-class feminism that views feminism as an attack on males rather than a system that encourages inequality.”

Richard (1980) believes that some social problem in Africa such as famish usually concentrate on the systematic economic injustice which is experienced by women is basically prevail as the result of their gender. Whereas according to Oakley (1981) African feminism is about putting women first, prioritizing their interest and representation those interest in every share of life for smith (1982) famish is the political theory and practicing that seeks to free women of all colors, classes, abilities, sexual orientations and ages from all forms of oppression. Thus, feminism in

African context attempts to influence politically and socially and tries to exercise some power on the current events so that women may gain more leadership powers in their communities.

The Role of Women in African Feminist Fiction

The African feminist fiction tries to examine the literary creation of a woman writer whose concern for and understanding of the experiences and fate of woman has won her an international acclaim. Feminist theory has to do with the propagation of political, social and economic equality of women with their male counterparts. Feminist writers in the African context try their best in their writings to propagate women emancipation. Women in African society are culturally and traditionally disallowed in the societal provisions, which should in effect, empower women socially, politically and economically through a dynamic and effectual weapon that is education.

The leading African exponents, who based their writings on feminist, are: Zaynab Alkali, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa among others. As we popularly known “True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and reliant” (Anne and Carole 1986:), the basic outlines of feminist literary movement are towards wiping women’s marginalization, discrimination, oppression, deprivation, restriction and inferiority complex which is culturally and socially exercised.

Thus, the strong points of the feminism are that as a literary movement and as it moves toward propagating political, social and economic privileges to seek for emancipation, it has the following:

Marginalization: Women in all fields of human endeavors are marginalized and considered weak etc.

Discrimination: Female sex is considered generally dependent on male and less productive. They are not employed and even if employed are less paid.

Oppression: Women at their work places and matrimonial homes are oppressed and intimidated. They receive enormous hatred, curse, beating etc. From their family members and laws.

Deprivation: Women are deprived their rights, privileges and freedom. They are economically deprived and disallowed the chances to elevate educationally.

Restriction: Women are restricted and denied the juicy realized in social interactions especially in African societies through traditional taboos and superstitions beliefs.

Inferiority complex: Is another strong point of feminism which attempts to show that women are inferior to their male counterparts. The proper place for women is kitchen, because they are weak, subservient naive etc. Compared to male sex which is considered as a symbol of strength authority etc.

These are the strong points which feminism theory tries to emphasis and make them viable in the patriarchal communities. While on the other hand, the weak points of the feminism are mostly derived from radical feminism as they deviate from the moderate posture of the earlier movements. Hence this paper tries to analyze these points in the Nigerian feminist novelist Zaynab Alkali’s novel “The Stillborn”

Alkali's Background

Zaynab Alkali was born in Borno state, Nigeria. She was educated at Queen Elizabeth Secondary School in Ilorin, Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and Bayero University, Kano. She is married with six children and considered as the first woman novelist in northern Nigeria and the first female to advocate openly about the female status in the northern Nigerian patriarchal society. She taught in different universities in Nigeria, such as University of Maiduguri, Nasarawa State University, and Bayero University, Kano in addition to her work at The National Primary Health Care Development Agency in Abuja. Her first novel "The stillborn" which was published in (1984) marks her debut as a novelist. The novel won the association of Nigerian Authors prize for prose fiction in 1985 after its publication in 1984 at Longman Nigeria Limited. The stillborn is a story that tells a narration of Li, a major and female character who faced deprivation and restriction from Baba her father who used to be a disciplinarian and rules his family with an Iron hand:

"After a few weeks at home, Li began to find the atmosphere in her father's compound suffocating. She felt trapped and unhappy already she missed the kind of life she had lived at primary boarding school, fries and gay. At home the little ones were too young to understand the restriction and the older ones too dull to react" (Alkali 1984:3)

Portrayal of Female Character in Alkali's Works

As regard to the portrayal of women in Alkali's works it is noted that; Amase and etal (2014) emphasize' she *"has utilized female characters to further a cause higher than any feminist grudge that a female character might harbor against the broader community"*. Alkali's subject woman, but her treatment of it indicates remarkably new emphasis which is different in degree, if not in kind, from the feminist position made familiar by novelists like Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emechita. Thus, it is clear that when reading her novels from feminist point view, an ascetic vision of truly liberated woman informs the themes as well as the styles of narrative world; specially her novel "The Stillborn" which openly manifest the status of woman in north Nigerian society. There is hardly a trace of excess of self-indulgence in Mrs. Alkali's prose; and this austere style effectively underscores the central argument of the novel because the stillborn shows a fully formed independent woman, not a stillbirth, the genealogy of such new woman is imprinted throughout with the ethical ideals of "independence" and "moral rectitude."

In her works, Zaynab Alkali educates her reading public about the woman's experience in a predominantly Muslim society. The major problems faced by Alkali's women seem to be that of man's struggle with nature. As women in Africa are reduced to male enslavement, Europe in the 14th -18th century witnessed a mass burning of witches whose parallel powers threatened the power of the aristocracy and the church. The experience in the Middle East was also traumatic as women were kept in confinement from puberty to menopause and derived the right to education. These oppression, deprivation and enslavement have found expression in many pages of African Literature as writers' present characters whose pathetic stories give their readers cause for concern and a challenge to women. In "The stillborn", Alkali uses Li, the principal character as a symbol of courage and determination, the two virtues that help her to become "the man of the house".

The Analysis of the Female Images in Alkali's *The Stillborn*

The stillborn can be described as culture based as Alkali delves into the cultural norms of her society where children were made to dance to the dictates of tradition. She uses Li and Sule to mirror the lamentable desecration which culture was subjected to and which parent found difficult to break.

Li is presented as a young woman seeking to escape from the oppressive societal restrictions. She therefore, insists doing things, even the simplest things her own way. Alkali's portrayal condemns the unfair and oppressive treatment of the African women trapped in the inability of women to become economically independent, through determination and hard work. Li and her brother Sule are so harassed in their household that Sule reveals to Li:

Can't wait to get out (p.4)

Commenting on "The Stillborn", Odiya Ofeimun (1975) says that the stillborn is of particular importance because it is written by a woman who is giving voice to womankind in Nigeria's North "beyond the whisper and muffle scream" which has been subjected to for centuries. Ofeimu's comment gives an insight into what the novel is preoccupied with: it tells the story of a girl from youth to puberty and womanhood and her struggles to give meaning and validity to her existence. In the course of these struggles, she is brought face to face with the harsh realities of life. But through determination, she in the end is able to overcome these social restraints and parental harassment.

Thus, in the novel, the female characters; and due to their exposure to western education, Li, Awa; Fiama, and Habu envision marriage as a successful union of one man and one woman, wherein they both contribute to the prosperity of the married family and live joyfully forever in love, as summarized in Li's beliefs.

She was planning to become an effective Grade I teacher, and Habu was going to become a renowned physician like the white guys who worked in the village mission hospital. Before her, a picture of a large European home filled with houseboys and maids appeared. Li grinned inside. The overgrown stream, the prickly hillside, and the dusty market would soon become distant memories. (p. 55)

Alkali condemns, through her protagonist, the suffocating atmosphere of many homes in urban and traditional settings. Baba's home, for instance is so suffocating that Li and Sule see it simply as "worse than a prison" (P.3)

The unloving and domineering attitude of Baba and the unpleasant behavior of their mother make Li miss her kind of life at the boarding school. Hence, her determination to escape and her insistence in doing things her own.

"Without someone constantly bugging me about where I've gone, (P.3)"

Just as Li is presented as a determined young Lady out to free herself from their "home prison", Alkali also presents Awa as Li's opposite. Humility makes her submit to the cruelty of her parents. At 18, Awa is still the "workaholic" of the house. She is so afraid of her parents that she dared not raise a dissenting voice against their cruelty.

Alkali here postulates that young girls like Awa suffer similar fate and they leave it too late by the time they finally free themselves. Awa allows herself to be used and controlled by her parents to the extent that Sule expresses fear for his 18-year old sister whom he fears might grow older than age if things continued like that. He wonders how a man of her age will continue to cage herself in the confines of the kitchen, cook, fetch water and do all sorts of house chores without thinking of her own future. She becomes the most oppressed. Alkali postulates that for women to liberate themselves, they must be disciplined and determined. Women Liberation is rooted in these two virtues and not any violent and aggressive rhetoric.

Li, the protagonist, is Alkali's embodiment of courage and self-discipline. She demonstrates the fact that the African woman could become someone if determined enough. Her self-discipline enables her to wait for such a long period as tradition demands. It helps her, during that period of waiting, to keep the likes of Alhaji Bature at bay. Her decision not to remarry even such a benefactor as Alhaji Bature who sees them through rainy days, demonstrates her self-discipline. She tactfully frustrates Awa's effort to forget Habu and marry Alhaji Bature.

How can I forget the father of my child, big sister? You yourself said, just now that to break up a home is like breaking a child (P.85).

What the passage implies is that Alkali discourages any form of divorce. She encourages women to stick to their husbands, especially if they were blessed with children. Li's self-discipline cautions her to keep her experience with Habu and his exploits to herself in order not to give room for gossip. Her resolve to become economically self-reliant and the importance she attaches to women education. With her education Li becomes "the man of the house". Education provides her the economic means to cater for the entire family without the help and protection of a man. Li becomes the symbol of the Western Education Women. In spite of the neglect and hardship, Faku survives in Garba's house through courage. Like Li, she keeps the sad experience of her marriage to herself, refusing to confide even in Li when she pays her a visit. Out of sheer determination, Faku carves out a new life for herself in the city. Initially the going is rough and:

"For four years Faku, drifted without a proper sense of direction. Then three years ago, she had been befriended by a kind elderly woman who interested herself in social welfare work. Now Faku was in the way of becoming a social welfare officer herself (P.102).

She finds fulfillment at last through self-determination and hard work. The three female characters in the stillborn are unfortunate to be subjected to traumatic marriage experiences. Alkali uses them to articulate the importance she attaches to the marriage institution. Some of the issues she handles in the stillborn include restrictions imposed on women by tradition and betrayal, which determines the fate of the protagonists.

Li marries Habu as the ideal husband to make her dream of city life comes true. Faku too married Garba for the same reason, while Awa marries Dan Fiama who, she thinks, will become the principal of the new school of her dream. But neither of them finds love or peace contrary to their expectations. Faku, the only victim of polygamy, finds neither love nor peaceful co-existence in Garba's household contrary to what the Holy book says about equality of love in marriage. And like Alhaji Usman in Tahir's *The Last Imam* whose preference for his

concubine's son alienates and frustrates his wives, Garba frustrates and subjects Faku to hardship and neglect.

What Alkali intimates here is that strained relationship creates a wide gap between couples and makes harmonious living difficult. She thinks polygamy contributes more to the subjugation of women. Marriage for her women becomes a mirage. Even Awa, who decides to remain in the village, is not spared for Dan Fiama becomes so frustrated that he becomes an alcoholic and abandons all responsibilities to her.

Li waits for Habu in the village for some years in keeping with tradition. In spite of all his shortcomings, Li decides to go back to the crippled Habu Adams in the belief that their destinies were tied together. The point Alkali makes here is that marriage to a good, honest, conscientious and God-fearing husband is bound to be successful in the words of Faku:

What was this love about which the others were scratching their heads? What was it, if not love, when a man took care of his household, fed and dressed them properly? Who was she to protest if a guy would provide for twelve other wives? (P.46)

However, when Li goes to town to meet her husband, after four years of being abandoned in the village, she meets a totally different Habu:

"Hot tears rolled down her cheeks as she bowed her head. Silently, she cried out, "Where is my man? That boyish man with an amazing smile and a wicked sparkle in his eye?" Where is my proud, self-assured, bikini-clad sweetheart who walked the entire length and breadth of the town against the jeers of the people just to see me? (p. 70)

Alkali posits here that there could be peace and harmony in polygamous homes when the husband meets all the need of the family. And where the reverse is the case like that of her protagonist, there is bound to be a failure.

Alkali is concerned with the disorder that permeates her society. One of the disorders in **The Stillborn** is gossip, which she sees as a social malaise that can easily dislocate the fabric of societal living. To sensitize her reading public, Alkali presents a selected group of characters who often associate themselves with rumor mongering, people who keep their eyes and their ears open to gossip.

The gossips about Faku's family make life unbearable for her in the village. Gossips have it that her mother is a witch and was responsible for the drowning of her three sons shortly after her husband's death. Faku is thus treated with mixed feelings. Her marriage to Garba becomes a welcome venture that provides her an escape from the depression. She becomes a victim of social injustice by no offence of hers.

But Li's family is the most gossiped in the village. So many detractors praise Mana's fortune for the impending marriage of her two daughters. Some disqualify Li as unfit for Habu and condemn her relationship with Alhaji Bature. The gossips about Alhaji Bature turn into an open confrontation between Li and his wives. The incident decides Li; she leaves the village to further her education in the city.

Alhaji Bature is seen as every woman's dream of a son in law. Dan Fiama is gossiped for taking up residence in his wife's house. There is also gossip about Kaka being a witch.

*Who uses infants to promote the growth of his crops
... and how a man of forty years (my senior) could
grow more corn (P.61).*

Another misnomer that Alkali points out in the stillborn is the negative influence of traditional norms on the young. Baba Garu's highhandedness, for instance, instills fear in his family. That is why returning home after her primary education; the thought of home dampens Li's spirits.

*When she considered her parents, a menacingly
gloomy notion threatened to overshadow her joy. She
swiftly repelled it. It was not appropriate to think
negatively at this moment. (P.1)*

Her hasty decision to marry has been born out of the suffocating atmosphere in the village.

The imposition that a married woman must wait for her husband to come and fetch her when visiting is another societal disorder. Li thus waits for four years before she is finally taken to Habu in Lagos. During her father's funeral, she again waits for Habu in vain until the encounter with Alhaji Bature's wives. Because of the constraints imposed on her by Baba, Awa still remains single at 18, always adhering to the traditional courtship that forbids a woman from taking undue interest in men. In her unfettered loyalty, Awa thus discourages Li from taking undue interest in Habu and makes abortive attempts to keep him away.

Against this background, Alkali's women could be said to be women of sound moral virtues. In spite of the long period of waiting for Habu, Li refuses to give in to pressure from Awa and Alhaji, thus preserving her moral virtue. Faku remains faithful to Garba despite the neglect. And Awa continues to accommodate Dan Fiama in spite of his irresponsible attitude and drunken stupors.

Alkali her points an interesting picture of village life. Its calmness and quietude punctuated only by the sound of the village generators, the second of which is

*Signaling the hour of sleep and releasing the night
to the walking witches and discontented spirits.
(P.2)*

One very interesting thing that dominates the lives of Alkali's female characters is the dream factor. Some of their dreams turn out to be mere illusions even though they end up marrying men of their choice. In their innocence, Li and Faku dream to marry well-to do men setting up home as contented wives and members of the emergent middle class. But their dreams become **The Stillborn**.

Some dreams bring the dreamer in terms with events of the day. Some deal with hidden anxieties while others try to resolve problems which stretch back many years. Some are revelatory while some others come as a warning of danger or disaster as in the case of Li.

The dream factor in **The Stillborn** is very much peculiar to Li. All her dreams become meaningful except that concerning Habu and the city. Her first dream warns Baba of the impending danger if he traveled. But he treated it as a child's anxiety. Li, in the dream, sees some sort of a vision in which she seen what would be invisible and unattainable to natural sight. In the first dream, the accident that awaited Baba Garu and the other members of the church

congregation. And during the intervening year's dreams becomes Li's regular source of encouragement and inspiration.

As a young lady, there were times when Li's lack of wisdom caused her father to react negatively. Her first dreams leave him weary of Li. Baba ignored her advice not to travel that day because something dreadful would happen to him. And the worst did happen. A sudden thunderstorm caused the prayer house to cave in leaving in hundred casualties and Baba seriously wounded.

In the city, Li dreams of her ancestral house in the dream:

“Li discovered her ancestors' house vacant and in ruins, along with all of the dwellings. A number of the huts were falling apart, whereas others had roots and doorways that had collapsed in. ... she moved to where her father's hut had been and saw a heap of red soil... (P.74).

The dream informs her of her father's death, which also becomes a reality. Li has two dreams in Faku's house. First, she sees Faku enter the house, naked and Garba enters shortly after, banging the door after him; secondly, she crosses a desert land and meets Faku tilling dry, unyielding land. And all her attempts to talk to Faku fail. The two dreams reveal Faku's pathetic situation in Garba's house. Her physical look is enough testimony for Li to realize the going was rough for Faku.

Li's dream of marrying a medical doctor and of the city that will “make her body smooth” and where “she would keep her hair long” becomes an illusion. She says of the city that:

“The city would continue to provide endless comforts. They held the key to the future. There were many amazing and extraordinary things in the world. And weren't they young, enthusiastic, and prepared to live their life to the fullest? (P.5)”.

But the luxurious life she anticipates with Habu in the city becomes a life of regret, nightmares and distress.

Li's dream comes when she falls into a reverie during which she witnesses her granddaughter's marriage. Li advises her to make the best of her marriage and that it was her daughter, shuwa's turn to dream. Li makes Shuwa aware that she'd spent her whole life dreaming and reminds her that:

“Children, it is good to dream since everyone passes away, and as long as we are alive, we will keep dreaming. However, it's also crucial to keep in mind that, unlike newborns, not all dreams come true. Some are stillborn, while others are aborted. (P.104)”

“Li is convinced by this dream that the connection that had bound her to Habu, the baby's father, hadn't been cut. (P.104).”

Alkali educates young people about the intricacies in life. She uses the dream factor to remind Li of her days gone by and of the Joys and excitements she'd had with Habu. This last dream projects Li into old age recreating in Shuwa her youthful exuberance; tall; graceful, and good-looking with a beautiful gap between the upper row of her teeth.

Awa dreams and looks to the future with optimism. She looks forward to seeing the primary school become a secondary school with Dan Fiama as principal and herself as head of adult education classes. But when the new school finally becomes a reality, Dan Fiama and she are made to serve in junior positions. They both become disappointed and frustrated. Dan Fiama becomes an alcoholic and Awa resigns herself to fate.

And for Faku, the city in her dreams becomes a paradise. She marries Garba not only to escape the suffocating atmosphere in the village created by gossips about her mother but to enjoy an easy life in the city. Like Awa and Li, Faku's dreams become Stillborn.

Most women see Alkali as a breakthrough in artistic creation on the part of women and the publication of her novels as an important event coming as it does at a time when Nigerian women were "taking horns". Other critics frown at what they regard "as unfair treatment of her male characters" but commend her in her attempt and determination to use the pen to fight the prevailing social problems eating deep into the fabric of the continent of Africa.

Like her contemporaries from the south, Alkali makes immense contributions to the creative female tradition of Nigeria writers which has predominantly been a southern affair. Again, like her percussions, Alkali is deeply conscious of the fundamental conflicts and frustrations confronting the African woman in the city and the rural area.

The more reason why she creates female characters with forceful personalities that help them realize themselves in society, in spite of their **stillborn** dreams, disappointment and frustrations. Alkali demonstrates in her writings creative potentials and acute sensitivity to female problems and experiences.

Conclusion

Deduction can be made that the results of the findings of this present paper revealed the real picture of the role of woman in Alkali's *The Stillborn* in which *feminist* literary criticism is used as the approach for the vindication of such role. The paper showed the negative influence of traditional norms on the youth in African societies. Thus, still the study showed the reason why the writer creates female characters with forceful personalities which will inevitably help them to realize themselves in male-dominated society, in spite of their the stillborn dream, disappointment and frustrations as clearly depicted in Li. Alkali also in this text- *The Stillborn* demonstrated creative potentials and acute sensitivity to female problems, which if they heed they can even contribute to the societal development much more than their counterparts. This similitude of course was portrayed especially through the main character Li, and her friend Faku.

Finally, reading novels including other genres of literature, especially those written by *female* writers is very much important for they add value to our understanding of the nature, style and how the portrayal of their characterization is assigned to women. Hence, learners should be encouraged to analyze the works by *female* writers using *feminism* as a theory towards the vindication of their world view regarding *male* domination we witness in our various societies.

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