

Research Article

Female Dignity and the Quest for Justice in Selected Northern Nigerian Female Authored Novels

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Abstract: Contemporary northern Nigerian female novelists employ diverse fictional strategies in their attempts to reposition the woman. This paper examines the female image and their quest for justice in northern Nigeria. This is done through a critique of some novels by these northern female writers: Zaynab Alkali, Razinat Mohammad, Asabe Kabir Usman, Maryam Bobi and Veronica Phebe who see education as the breakthrough. These Feminist writers attempt a reconstruct of the female, who tends to have found a voice to demand for fair and equity treatment in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: These novels have created a canon that questions oppressive conditions of women, rooted in the tradition/the society.

INTRODUCTION

Major aspects of a typical African society exhibit restrictive traditions regarding women. They are restricted from enjoying the same privileges as their male counterparts; acquiring education, freedom of speech and participation in other important socio-cultural activities of their communities. "The woman also has "...to be tolerant and cultivate resilience before sufferings and trying experiences" (Ssetuba 2). The traditional distributive measure of privileges across gender in Africa (Nigeria specific) is so unjust, that from childhood through adulthood, the woman is victimized circumstantially that, she loses her dignity and self-esteem except if she is able to raise her head above the turbulent water of life.

The need for her to be obedient and submissive to an eventual husband is the focus of her upbringing. When married, she takes the challenge of and blame for childlessness. Marriage turns out to be enslavement rather than love and companionship. Though Islam is the dominant religion in northern Nigeria, the problems of the woman emanate more from culture and tradition rather than religion. If at all, it is against the societal practice of a culture-adulterated Islam sold to the women folk as the true Islam. The phenomenon of change in character development to project and redirect thematic focus in recent feminist fiction is the main focus of this paper. To achieve the said phenomenon of

change, authors try to interrogate the social challenges of their female characters, as well as equip them with weapons of possible freedom from socio-cultural enslavement. Egya (211) opines that:

Feminist writers in Nigeria... deploy diverse tropes to unsettle male invented conventions considered inimical to self-development of the girl child in her society. Tropes here...have to do with the background of the authors in which case the feminist author tells her own story from her own ethnic/regional background. Alkali from northern Nigeria, dramatizes in her fiction the struggle of the girl child to acquire education and empower herself in northern Nigeria.

Northern Nigerian female writers through their fictional works raise realistic issues of choice, conflict, enslavement and injustice that beclouds the life of not just the Hausa female but Nigerian women in general as they attempt to fit into cross-cultural relationship in a modern world, raising the questions of ability, impediments and capability.

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Theoretical Framework

Chikwenye Ogunyemi, was the first Africa theorist to use the term Womanism, which she describes in her article, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English", "as a philosophy that celebrates black roots, ideals of black womandom ... This philosophy has a medalic core: its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and a self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative ending of womanist novels" (Ogunyemi 72). Ogunyemi's concepts of Womanism (Black and African Womanism) are continental friendly and communalism inclined. They include and consider the diverse cultures of Africa in their conceptualization of Womanism, away from Alice Walker's Womanism. She identifies four Cs - conciliation, collaboration, consensus and complementarity, to establish a healthy social relationship, irrespective of class, gender, race, religion, politics, ethics, education etc.

Alkali (15) believes that "African women writers are definitely on the war path to redeem their image and to reclaim the identity and integrity of their ancestors." These female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Efua Sutherland, Maryama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, among others, have served and are still serving as instrument of modifications of consciousness and organization of the sensibility of women, through their respective views on the prevalent issues of position and identity of the female both in the society and in African literature. This emergent literary discourse has created a formidable platform "for examining and articulating gender and sexuality in written African literature" (Azodo 78). One of such is Buchi Emecheta who:

...bemoans the ruthlessness of the traditional system in which a woman exist only to give pleasure to the man, bear his children, wash his clothes and eventually receive his punches, she explores this state of affairs which eventually corrodes the woman's ego, depriving her of every human dignity and reducing her to the state of utter hopelessness. This she explores fully in her novel, the Joys of Motherhood and even succinctly in Second Class Citizen. (Acholonu 220).

WOMEN DIGNITY IN LITERARY WRITING AND THE FEMALE WRITERS

The long trend of women presentation and societal perception and revelation gave rise to the transformative change in literary writings and to what Alkali called "Rereading Femininity" (Alkali 180). The idea of repositioning womanhood through these literary voices is the focus of these writers. "...the preoccupation of African women writers is to redefine African womanhood, represent an authentic personality different from that portrayed by male writers..." (Uko 83). Therefore, the landmark in African literature is

identified by the feminization of literary vision to reverse and correct the absurd image of women. The non-satisfying or non-appreciation of the women's significance, angers the women. They therefore, create characters with reversed roles to that credited to females, by men.

The significance of education is glaring as it provides the women with the required knowledge of their religion which is the reason why it is in place that the works of the women writers portray both the traditional and contemporary African women hounding for fulfillment, identity, and self-actualization and demanding for justice in all spheres. Feminist writers enact female characters that are allegories of social realities.

This paper therefore deviates from the normal analytical convention of northern Nigeria Muslim, to encapsulate the counterpart religion; Christianity. This is seen in the textual interrogation of Jatau's *The Hound*. This critical perspective is relevant in establishing a more realistic and all-encompassing ideological ethos of the Nigerian woman's struggle for justice. Consequently, the contemporary female novelists (especially in northern Nigeria) rather than continue to lament the female predicament, attempt a projection of females who are survivors of dehumanizing enslavement, vicissitudes and hurdles which permeate post-colonial Nigerian societies. Through these works, women are encouraged to fight the traumatic impact of subjugation and injustice like rape, denial of education, forced/early marriage, and dehumanizing treatment of widows, domestic violence, and career marginalization, among others. With over forty years of female active participation in writing, "the Nigerian woman has made giant strides in her socio political and economic standing in the society..." (Orabueze 85). However, many women still suffer the challenges of gender inequality, discrimination, injustice, degradation, humiliation and dehumanization, despite education or economic empowerment.

ZAYNAB ALKALI'S RADICAL PERSPECTIVES

Zaynab Alkali's *The Still Born* (1984), displays "...a dramatization of change, of the escape from one level of selfhood to another and the philosophy of complementarity and exemplifies matrimony in Africa" (Egya 215). Li, the protagonist of the novel, is central to the various conflicts in the story. She is an embodiment of social change, bold and assertive against her docile and naïve elder sister, Awa. These qualities (uncommon with girls of her age, time and community) often get her into trouble with her father and the cultures. She revolts against those aspects of the tradition that are utilized by her father to achieve female confinement in his household. Li takes the bold step of disobeying her father's order- she sneaks out to attend moonlight activities in the village and to keep a date with Habu Adams, her boyfriend (20).

The various strangled stories in the novel are collectively used as a style to show the generality of the northern woman's place in society. Li's life is central to the stories as it pulls together complex elements to the social relationship into one knot. The novel also narrates "the story of the village, as well as respective stories of Awa and Faku. Li's quest for self-dignity and equity treatment influences her imaginary world. She sees the city as 'paradise', where women are allowed to utilize their education for personal gain (55). In marriage, Li is disappointed by Habu's disloyalty and maltreatment, Awa adopts the obedient daughter' status as her strategy of coping with socio-cultural pressure. She also suffers in the hands of men like her husband, the headmaster. Awa is therefore, a victim of the same society she respects.

Faku, Li's friend suffers under the patriarchal system and results to prostitution as a means of survival. Later, Faku overcomes her predicament by acquiring education and skills, to ease 'her life misery' (100), and get a job as a social worker in the city. Li is ultimately successful through education and economic independence. Her efforts at 'making it in life' (102) are not dependent on any male. This contributes to her elevation as 'the man of the house' (102), on her father's death. Besides, Li is able to boldly return to her husband in the city to negotiate a marriage of partnership in line with Ogunyemi's four Cs – conciliation, collaboration, consensus and complementarity, rather than followership. She says to Awa:

'I am going back to the city-----
'Why Li, the man is lame', said the sister.
'We are all lame, daughter of my mother. But this is not the time to crawl. It is the time to walk again'.
'So you want to hold the crutches and lead the way?' Awa asked.....
'No, I will just hand him the crutches and side by side we learn to walk'....
(112).

Alkali projects Li and the other two as women who get their fair share of patriarchal subjugation. But their quest for justice and identity provides them with the will to change their condition for the better. Alkali creates Li who though younger, seems bolder, more assertive and radical, to most times, the discomfort of Awa.

In *The Descendants* (2005), Alkali takes a step beyond politics or idiom of marriage to radical call for the education and emancipation of the Nigerian (northern) girl child. She presents tough and bold female heroines in the stories of Mama and Seytu: while Mama is portrayed as a victim of patriarchy,

subsumed in the decision making of her father who imposes on her a husband. Aliyu, Mama's husband forbids her from studying Medicine on the basis that it was too masculine, Seytu is portrayed as the changed woman from the angle of education or professionalism, she boldly ventures into 'masculine job or profession like Medicine, against her husband's advice.

The author asserts that the female body deserves greater attention and comfort, as it is "increasingly abused, victimized and subjected to cultural violence" (Egya 240). To achieve this, characters like Seytu overcame the various physical and psychological challenges they encountered as women. Seytu at the end of the novel emerges as a pediatrician, more successful than her male counterparts. She surmounts her earlier life challenges and stigmatization-marriage at age thirteen and a 'ruptured vagina' which is a secret shame' she carries, despite her beauty. These challenges rather than kill her, give her the zeal to search for a better life through education. She not only takes steps to actualize her dream of becoming a medical doctor. Her grandmother a symbol for support and mentorship prays for her: "Seytu, the daughter of Iliia, her affliction pulls my heart strings. Grant her a successful operation and cure her. Let her read and become educated. I want her to compete with the doctors at Makulpo Hospital" (vi). Here Alkali preempt a change by using Maigira Milli, an old woman and symbol of tradition to provide the support and encouragement for change in the life of the northern Nigerian girl child.

Mero, another female character in the novel also undergoes life's challenges. She is an orphan like Seytu, but has no grandparents to care for her. She ends up with Usman, her father's friend and business associate as a husband rather than a father figure or guardian. Mero is subjected to the rigor of childbirth at barely fifteen years. She carries with her a sad countenance;

The very young woman, not yet fifteen looked severely emaciated,....Mero was a highly composed young woman and worked harder than anybody else in the household. She always had bags under her eyes, which made her look older than she actually was. Highly strong and inhibited, she rarely laughed but when she did, her face would light up like the little girl that she was, with such beauty one would wish Mero laughed more often

After Usman's death, she struggled to find love and live life again, despite her also ruptured vagina an injured womb. She died during childbirth.

The novel's portrayal of Mero and Peni is to establish the reality that not all females are strong willed and not

all are as lucky as Seytu. To Alkali, determination abides in the attempt to try, but success is not a fixed and constant result of every trial. However, women should try to make something meaningful out of their lives.

To give room for the women to be role model characters, Alkali in her fiction portrays her male characters as "...inadequate in masculine task, they are wimpy degenerate, retarded and emasculated" (Emenyonu as qtd in Alkali 15). Alkali's major preoccupation is with education as survival string of the female for attaining sexual relevance, social status and economic freedom. Education therefore is viewed by Alkali to be a tool for the female freedom from these socio-cultural impediments and tickets to economic empowerment, although these leverages do not completely liberate her from patriarchal impediments and subjugation. Majola, (126), observes that in Zaynab Alkali's works "...the manner in which women are burdened by discriminatory social, economic and religious structures as well as possible remedies to these constraints is of primary importance."

MINDING THE GAP IN DESTINIES OF LIFE (2005)

Destinies of Life projects a purposeful, intelligent, assertive, strong-willed and as well as a humble and considerate Aisha, the protagonist of the novel. She breaches the gap between respect for tradition and revolt against subjugation. Aisha stands up to her step mother and step sisters' hostilities while she remains submissive and obedient to Baba, her father. She is ambitious and intelligent; at the age of sixteen, Aisha "...dreams of becoming a lecturer" (46). Her determination and individualistic consciousness and potentials propel her towards success in every sphere of womanhood - daughter, wife and mother. Aisha revolts against injustice and hostility subtly on the defensive, but manages to adhere to traditional expectations and realities of her society. She tells Umar, her husband: "I am not leaving because you are getting married. It is the way you are setting or going about the issue that gets on my nerves ... "(73).

Ironically, the opportunity to live an actualized life is achieved outside marriage. All her attempts to be a good wife result to nothing. She is viewed and projected as the assertive personality of the new African woman, who though respects the institution of marriage and tradition and tries her best to make it work, does not see the need to be slave to it. In this novel, education is used on the defense of the woman against patriarchy and social subjugation. Aisha's survival and success outside marriage is achieved through education. Education minds the 'gap' between spinsterhood, wifehood and divorce/single motherhood. Nevertheless, her determination to survive and her individualistic consciousness and potentials serve as her driving force. She displays an amazing standard of individual

perfection and responsibility. The death of Mukhtar, her son and later her father only temporarily devastated her but did not demoralize her or stop her from picking up the pieces of her life to continue in her assertiveness towards her aspirations.

It is necessary to acknowledge this new African woman created by the author to pass the message of hope to every African woman enjoining them to explore, discover and utilize their hidden potentials. Unlike her mother (and indeed other African women), Aisha made her choices of husbands. Here, the author places her above forced marriage. In addition, she does not get married until her "-- second year in the university" (27).

RAZINAT MOHAMMED'S ALLEGORICAL CHARACTER.

Razinat T. Mohammed's *Habiba* (2013), is an exploration of the northern Nigerian woman/girl-child's "...reaction to her background, her sense of values, the issues in modern society that challenge her, her effort at surmounting these challenges, the expectation that the society has of her..."(Uko 110). Razinat's *Habiba* tells the story of a young Hausa girl, Habiba who is both a victim of poverty, subjugation and social responsibility. Her youth and ambitions are lost in the inferno of over burden. Habiba, the heroine is a girl caught in restrictive circle of tradition, poverty, female subjugation and social responsibility. She is portrayed by the author as a circumstantial allegory of the overburdened female, who is enslaved. Her grandmother masterminds her marriage without her consent to a stranger and a man old enough to be her father. She accepts the injustice perpetrated against her, resigning herself to fate, after several unsuccessful attempts to escape. She is also a victim of molestation as she is raped by Mal. Zuberu "each time she was asked to visit him" (168). In an attempt to get even, Habiba concludes that "a disposition that would invariably compel Zuberu to send her away was what she had to work on" (169).

Though Habiba is not educated, she is ambitious and searches for education and self-actualization. Though she did not succeed, she makes several attempts to escape from and reject the role written for her by both family and society. The radical rhetoric of this text is such that, most female characters in it are allegories of the various forms of oppressive manipulations and practices that burden women in the patriarchal society.

Habiba has a complexity that arouses our revolt against these practices as they affect her and her contemporaries. Through this complex character, the authorial voice raises a strong demand for justice and fairness in societal disposition towards females. It calls for her right to education, self-actualization, life's choices, love and respect from the males in her life. The question of forced marriage to the detriment of

education is a major thematic focus in this novel as raised by Habiba, the protagonist and authorial intrusion, when her father announces her planned marriage, she questions, "... Now what about my school? I want to go to school, please" (30). Habiba struggles without success against tradition and subjugation, but each attempt is thwarted by one misfortune or the other. Her attempt to find peace for Ummi and herself led to the decision to run away from her mother's house, since "...she could not fully understand the true position of love" (14). In her naivety, she is optimistic that she could fulfill her dream of going to school in her father's house. This attempt by Habiba to find parental love and protection sends her to the misfortune of early and forced marriage, putting an end to her education. Her Physical and psychological well-being is threatened by these suppression, oppression and discrimination that amounts to enslavement. The novel draws our attention to the plight of women in northern Nigeria as sympathetic characters.

Habiba realizes that, "... She needed to assume a state of mind to keep her sanity" (169). The enslavement of a loveless marriage is compounded by the frequent rape by Zubairu, her husband. This to Habiba is "because she was a naive and obedient child..." (168).

QUEST FOR RIGHT TO SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN *THE HOUND*

Veronica Phebe Jatau in *The Hound*, presents the northern Nigerian woman first from a Christian angle, to partially disclaim Islam as the problem of the northern Nigerian woman. It also nullifies poverty as a yardstick for the female plight by creating a female character, who though comes from a very poor background, struggles to excel, and actualize her dreams. The social relevance of the woman as she contributes to society is fulfilled by Rebecca. Baba is aware of their poverty status, he therefore sees the need to educate Rebecca as a means to ending poverty. Rebecca on her part "...already knew the hurt and pain of the reproach poverty brought with it" (32). As a result, "she vowed never to be poor, she promised to work hard to overcome poverty" (32). The author asserts that hard work and education can elevate the status of women irrespective of societal constraints.

Though assertive and strong willed, Rebecca did not escape life's burden and male chauvinism. But she withstands and overcomes them. Her marriage to James exposes her to the reality and experience of marital oppression, motherhood and schooling. The trauma and disappointment of a failed marriage are surmountable challenges to Rebecca. She takes full charge of her life and makes decisions on her own, with a Ph.D fellowship in the US, Rebecca reaches the peak of her quest for self-actualization which sustained her aspiration "...to help women like her to do school and

be self-actualized in spite of their challenges and limitations" (111). The author opines that women should aspire for success through education and that the self-actualization of one girl/woman can inspire others. The dignity of the female lies in her education. Phebe laments the way men especially, take advantage of women's helplessness to exploit them. She therefore urges women to aspire for education through determination and hard work to give them the required shield for surviving all injustice and for actualizing themselves. Rebecca is able to over-step all the challenges of attempted enslavement, and with education she achieved self-actualization.

THE NEW WOMAN IN BOBI'S *BONGEL*

Maryam Bobi's *Bongel* (2014) takes a subtle but radical approach to the issue of the girl-child in northern Nigeria. She treats the issue of education or self-actualization with utmost seriousness, especially after an unforgettable past. The stigma of divorce, single motherhood and ex-prostitutes is the protest of Maryam Bobi. The various experiences of subjugation, early marriage or marriage to older men corrode the ego and self-esteem of the girl child. And the "...terrifying prospects of not ever getting to complete her education before becoming betrothed dented Bongel's self-esteem" (32). She questions the injustice of the circumstances that neglects the girl/woman's feelings, especially when taking decisions that concerns her. "Why was it that nobody ever cared about what she wanted anyway? How could her father just negotiate her off as if she was one of the cattle" (36)?

The novel is a clarion call to all, to see the importance of giving their daughters educational and other life opportunities. Women like Jumai, Bongel's mother have potentials and are assertive. In an attempt to convince her husband to allow Bongel go to school, Jumai says: "The times are changing my husband. Many people of our stock are now sending their children out to go get western education... besides, the government is saying that every girl has the right to education" (40).

Maryam Bobi uses the headmistress to express her strong conviction that education gives the woman the desired personality, self-esteem and confidence to excel in life and curtail male chauvinism. "The Headmistress impressed Bongel. She spoke gently but with authority and confidence, unlike her mother who would barely look her father in the face. Bongel was sure only education could arm a woman so, a conviction that left her the more resolved to go to school" (46).

The lack of it jeopardizes the lives of females and increases their level of vulnerability in life. Many women die as a result of conservative and restrictive traditional practices around them. 'Farida' is one such character. She died "... because her husband wouldn't permit her to visit the hospitals" (50). The secret of her past; the story of her marriage is a strong voice of the

author against forced child marriage and marital molestation or rape. After the numerous love making sessions and a prolonged labor, Bongel ends up with a still birth and VVF (Vasico Vaginal Fistula). But instead of pity from her husband and father, she and her mother get divorce letters and blame for the death of the child.

This reality of marital exploitation is replayed in fictional works especially female fiction to raise women's voices against these acts and their adverse effect on the girl-child/woman. The memory of these experiences is carried with victims, such that it affects their disposition and relationship with other people. Bongel "found it difficult to just go out there and make new friends" (81). Her fear of the past affects her fear of the future. Her inability to detach herself from the cloudy past and yet not being able to talk about it worries her.

CONCLUSION

The various impediments that becloud the life of the African/Nigerian girl-child are stiffer in northern Nigeria because of the patriarchal nature of the society. She is unjustly treated in comparison with her male counterpart (brothers), exploited and dehumanized in marriage, maltreated in widowhood, blamed for the death of a child or husband, or the birth of a female instead of a male child, childlessness or child's bad behavior. The selfish interests of men are satisfied at the detriment of the woman's happiness, esteem, dignity and self-actualization.

Silence is no longer golden in the face of oppression, therefore the need to rise against it. However, men may not be the only enemies but ignorance, intolerance, positivity and stagnant societies that are resistant to change. Women need to therefore seek change in the society by first changing their perception. They should always walk away from their past and embrace the future. The idea of justice to them transcends gender, and the society should give the female a fair share of life's opportunities especially education which can provide her with the required tentacles to succeed.

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