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New Directions in Northern Nigerian Women's Writings: A Study of Zaynab Alkali's *The Initiates* and *Invisible Borders*

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Abstract

*Creative writings by women have gained recognition because of the women writers' concern with the problems that are affecting women generally. The study seeks to show that women's writings particularly in Northern Nigeria have changed and undergone transformation in terms of characterization and thematic concern. Alkali, for instance, in *The Initiates* and *Invisible Borders*, focuses on contemporary issues from a different perspective without dwelling on feminist issues or the usual theme of women emancipation. Instead, the writer depicts issues that affect the society at large. The study uses postmodern feminist approach because it uncovers multiple realities, perspectives and roles so that all voices may be heard. Using the two texts, the study asserts that women's writings are not the same and do not strictly focus on women emancipation. The two novels indicate the recent shift in Alkali's writings particularly in terms of content and thematic concern.*

Keywords: Women Writers, Feminism, Nigerian Novel, Postmodern Feminism, Alkali.

Introduction

The thematic preoccupation of many African women writers' creative writings, particularly, those from Northern Nigeria, has been the elevation of the images of women to a dignified status in their works. Issues of women have been depicted from numerous perspectives. They take the challenge of redefining the roles of women against the depiction of women in male writings. This is because women are depicted as second-class citizens whose only roles are assumed to be taking care of the family. Early colonial writings of Joyce Carry's *Mister Johnson* laid the background for such depiction of women, which was subsequently followed by early male writings such as in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jaguar Nana* and Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1952). Women were not considered to be important and were depicted as housewives, mistresses and always uneducated because then, education was just for men. Women were not given the opportunity to show their capabilities and were therefore portrayed as useless. This is because they were believed to be unenlightened and could not give meaningful contribution to the society. Mohammed (2007) has written that "the dismal representation of women in early Nigerian Literature is not unconnected with the patriarchal nature of the traditional societies in addition to the colonially inspired value judgment of the time. Women in traditional African societies were hardly visible and were restricted to domestic chores" (pp. 47-49). This is in line with Alkali's view on the nature of female characterization in male writings:

The unmarried ones...come mistresses and women of easy virtue, even when they are highly placed career women. Going by some male mentality, the beautiful, intelligent, scheming seductress... is better kept outside the matrimonial home and secretly visited because she is not only dangerous but without respect and honor... thus a double standard is set for the obedient wife and respected mother and another for dishonorable sister. (2012, p.13)

It is as a result of such characterization that female writers emerged to challenge such depictions. Although, the issue of emancipation has been the concern of every female writer in their writings, the ways they depict the plight of women differ in several respects. Early works written by women writers take radical steps in emancipating women and portraying various kinds of oppression or subjugation women encounter in their lives. Themes like hardship, betrayal, role reversals are the distinctive features of women's writings. The writers aim at bringing out the traditional constraints hindering women from succeeding in life. All these issues find adequate expressions in novels like Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and a host of others. Nwapa clearly states that she “deliberately reverse the roles of men in response to earlier depiction in male writings” (Alkali, 2012, p.14). Similarly, Uko (2006) has identified the features of women writings like “iconoclasm, the deliberate repudiation of all arch symbols of traditionalism and orthodoxy, as well as women's prescient critique of female subjugation, psychological brutality, individual inferiorisation and exclusion on gender lines” (p. 82).

Women writers are now shifting their concerns and accommodating new changes as opposed to the earlier concern with the usual theme of emancipation. Alkali in her creative works, has depicted various issues that affect women in the society. She has responded adequately to contemporary issues and has reflected them in her fiction. All these issues find memorable expression in *The Descendants*, *The Initiates* and *Invisible Borders* which are just like the continuation of her previous works where her female characters are gradually educated and are transformed into modern sophisticated women. This is reflected in the character of Umma Seytu in *The Descendants*, who is maltreated at the beginning of the novel and at the end becomes a doctor. Avi Dayyan in *The Initiates* is portrayed as an educated character who works hard to cater for the needs of her family. Alkali's *Invisible Borders* also tries to fill in the gap and pave the way for something new and different compared to her earlier works. This is evident in the words of Abdu (2017):

Invisible Borders by Alkali was published on the crest of readers' yearnings for something new, something different from the common run of novels in Nigeria, nay in Africa, in which the authors are still toeing the too familiar representation of colonial, neo colonial concerns with the village...the

dilemma of education; the dilemma of the educated African, (the clash of African and western agencies) the dissonance of the individual and in the face of juggernaut institutions and unfeeling dictatorial leaders and systems...(p. 2)

It is against this background that this paper examines Alkali's *The Initiates* and *Invisible Borders* by paying attention to the recent shifts and new directions in her two selected novels from a postmodern feminist perspective. The study draws attention to the new woman and the new identity of the modern northern Nigerian woman. Besides, the study seeks to show the new ways and tools used by the writer to help the female characters fulfill their dreams.

Background to the Texts

The Initiates and *Invisible Borders* are two novels written by Zaynab Alkali. The two novels address issues affecting men and women such as education, marriage, power and power relations. *Invisible Borders* projects an image of unity in a diverse Nigerian setting, shifting from one part of the country to another. *The Initiates* focuses on corruption, betrayal and love. Alkali is a professor in African Literature. Ojinmah and Egya (2005) indicate that Alkali admits that she has been influenced by the Egyptian El-Saadawi for her feminist guts; Ngugi wa Thiongo for his Marxist messages; Achebe for his local proverbs and Hemmingway for his well-crafted autobiographies and good plots (p. 142). Alkali has written many prose works such as *The Virtuous Woman* (1986), *The Stillborn* (1984), *The Descendants* (2005), *The Initiates* (2007) *Invisible Borders* (2016) *Cobwebs and other Stories* (1997). From the emergence of *The Stillborn* (1984), Alkali's concern has been "a gender conscious literary approach to the representation of women and the exigencies of her experiences within a patriarchal society. She creates female characters that possess the power to redefine their roles in the society" (Joseph, 2006, p.245). In all her works, she depicts the socio economic and cultural conditions of women in relation to her male counterparts and positions herself in and around the marriage institution.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism is an ideological movement aimed at changing the existing power relations between men and women. Many writers of literature continue to stress the need to update the image of women in their works. The emergence of women's movement that seeks to advocate for changing the roles of women to a fair status is what is described as feminism, a movement that Bressler (2003) traces to the seventeenth century (p. 145). This is evident in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Gilbert. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf's *A Room for One's Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977) discuss and raise concern on the way women are oppressed and how they are considered inferior or secondary. Bressler (2003)

indicates that “American feminism is essentially textual stressing expression; [but] British feminism is essentially Marxist stressing oppression; and French feminism is essentially psychoanalytic, stressing repression” (p. 150).

The varying feminist perspectives above indicate different forms of concerns and social oppression that affects the lives of women. Despite the various schools that emerged, they seem to have a collective desire which is to rescue the woman from being considered the “other” and update her image. For centuries, women have been denied the position of the subject; they have been seen as the other with lower identity. Postmodern feminism began in 1980's and postmodern feminists challenge and avoid the essentialist definitions of femininity that were spread during the modern period. Key advocates of Postmodern feminism include Helen Cixious, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. They built on the ideas of Derrida, De Beauvoir, Freud and Lacan. Butler emphasizes the importance of a kind of double movement which allows feminists to have both political justification and recognition, multiplicity of identical sites rather than advocating for single identity (1993, p. 29). The postmodern feminists focus on differences have offered them the opportunity to draw attention to women who had previously felt excluded. Postmodern feminism has provided space that legitimises the search for the voices of the displaced, marginalized and oppressed black people (Hooks, 1984, p. 25).

One important feature that is relevant to this study about postmodern feminism is the rejection of the feminist label. Postmodern feminists reject all encompassing statements like “man is this, “woman is that”, and assume there is no one way to be a feminist. Postmodern feminism dissolves the universal subject and the possibility that women speak in a unified voice or they can be universally addressed.

This paper therefore, redirects attention to the different forms of women portrayal in the two selected texts. Since postmodern feminism rejects any mode of feminist thought that aims at providing a single explanation that all women are oppressed and steps to be taken to achieve liberation, this study dwells on two novels and suggest a possibility of considering them as different texts by Alkali in relation to her previous writings.

Textual Analysis

The Initiates

This is a different type of fiction written by Alkali because of the issues it explores. It is a novel that deals with the issues of power and power relations between men and women. The image of women has undergone transformation in the worldview of Alkali as evident in the novel. Avi Dayyan is portrayed as an educated character who struggles hard to cater for the needs of her family. She is portrayed as a successful character though she is not married. Alkali has not forgotten her focus where her female characters are always in the position to achieve the best in life. Alkali elevates the status of Avi Dayyan both at the family and societal level. At the

family level, Avi Dayyan has been elevated to a status superior to her male brothers like Samba and Salvia and she is loved by her parents. She is described as Batancha's spitting image (p. 72) in the text. Salvia wonders why he could not sit and talk to his father the way Avi Dayyan does and he always feel a hallow feeling of alienation. His father never discusses serious issues with him, "the old man never looked at him that way. He treats him like a child" (p. 70).

This shows that Alkali creates room for her female characters in her novels so as to show their capabilities and importance even in the family if they work hard. Alkali tries to show that the role of a woman can be elevated from doing household chores to other active roles. This can be seen in Avi Dayyan's effort to combine the duty of a mother because she picks abandoned babies and take care of them with her formal activities in the office. She is a character that is portrayed as hardworking who works in an oil company, has a jeep and a driver. The writer uses a very strong weapon or tool which is education to transform the lives of her female characters. This kind of female character portrayal is different from what obtains in the previous works of Alkali such as *The Virtuous Woman* and *The Stillborn*. Mama in *The Stillborn* is just a housewife and Nana Ai in *The Virtuous Woman* considers herself to be inferior because she does not think she can become a doctor despite the fact that she wanted to read medicine. She says "if I were a male I would be a doctor" (p.10). The depiction of women in *The Descendants* and *The Initiates* is different as Alkali portrays new characters that are successful. Alu considers this shift from one stage to another to be as a result of the situation on ground. She says "It is apparent then that Alkali gives the woman a voice to make demands of her right. She needed to appear authentic and realistic to create satisfactory role models; if not the character ought to be a radical or militant character" (2007, p. 292).

Alkali carefully chooses her characters in this novel. She portrays few strong female characters like Avi Dayyan and many strong male characters like Salvia, Samba Musa Ture, Batancha and Brigadier Hashim. Alkali's artistic creativity has transformed through her ability to portray the issues of power. Salvia for instance represents the initiates who are responsible leaders capable of rescuing the lives of individuals in the society. His efforts are seen in his contribution to the village. He builds culverts, renovates primary schools and performs other youth projects. Salvia and his friends "have made proposals to build culverts, fix potholes and roads that linked the villages, rebuild one of the burnt markets, dug three bore holes, reactivate drug revolving scheme in the primary healthcare and bought furniture (pp.39-40).

Salvia is portrayed as a man dedicated to serve his community. He is described as a young man that is responsible and generous. He is unique since his childhood but his problem is his ability to fall in trance which prevents him from staying in the city. This issue of dreams and trance are peculiar in Alkali's works especially in *The Stillborn* and now repeated in *The Initiates*. Samba is another character who is committed in serving his country. He also represents an example of "the initiates" which can be seen from the perspective of the military which is at war with the civilians. Samba in his own attempt to plot a coup against the government

was betrayed. Salvia and Samba are two characters with different qualities. Their roles are juxtaposed and Alkali describes Salvia as “a young man... thoroughly clear, polite and hardworking unlike Samba who always set Debro on fire” (p. 144).

Moreso, the ordinary citizens in the novel are not left behind and are also elevated to higher statuses. For instance, Musa Ture known as Saji Mbalma the drunk is given the opportunity to search for Samba and he changes. His new position is described, thus: “Musa Ture ceased to be Saji Mbalma the drunk, as he completely abandoned his lover Tambal the brewer and her beer parlour. Instead, he became one of the most respected, responsible disciplined men in town” (p. 173).

Alkali's depiction of her male characters is different when compared with other Nigerian women writers like Mohammed, Nwapa, Emecheta among others. She juxtaposes the roles of female and male characters so as to depict the real picture of the kinds of people in the society and also show the importance and effect of each characters' action.

Besides, another dominant concern in Alkali's novels is the issue of marriage. This is because it symbolizes a sign of fulfillment and achievement in the text. Avi Dayyan's marriage to Brigadier Hussein of Dapchi and Salvia's marriage to Hafsa (Nina) symbolises hope and fulfillment in their lives. Marriage is portrayed as the final fulfillment of her characters whereas in her previous works and other female writer's works, it marks the beginning of disillusionment in the lives of the female characters.

In essence, *The Initiates* represents a different type of Alkali's fiction. In the novel therefore, we find that the strong characters are mostly males and she depicts wider issues of power in the society without restricting her concern to female emancipation. Considering the role of women in the text, Avi Dayyan is depicted as a strong character who is successful in marriage, and in her career without any difficulty or any form of oppression. Alkali creates a balance in the novel as she gives room or opportunity for both male and female characters to perform the roles equal to the task assigned to them.

Invisible Borders

Invisible Borders (2016) just like Alkali's *The Initiates* is another interesting novel that depicts many important issues like education, power and power relations. It is also a novel that portrays the capability of a female child. Her capabilities stem from the fact that she is educated. As always Alkali uses education as a very strong weapon to transform her female characters particularly within a short span of time. The issue of education is a very important tool in Alkali's fiction and it is used as a tool to empower most of Alkali's characters. In this novel, the characters especially the female ones are no longer denied education and they are allowed to continue with their studies. Their dreams are realized because the female characters are hopeful and they believe they can achieve the best. The writer allows the female character to continue with her studies despite the incidents of betrayal that she experienced. These do not in any way make her witness a setback. Alkali did not mention any

incident of the rejection of Safia's education and there is no single account of her family persuading or pushing her to marry another person against her wish. This is contrary to the characters in Alkali's other novels who consider themselves to be inferior especially Nana Ai in *The Virtuous Woman* and Peni in *The Descendants*.

Instead, Alkali depicts the male character (Sam) to be the one who encounters various problems which hinders him from pursuing the course of his choice. However, Alkali did not allow the problems to hinder Sam from completing his studies despite numerous changes and impediments. Alkali reverses the roles of her characters but in a modern way. This kind of reversal is just an effort to depict the real picture of happenings in the society, and the possibility of a woman achieving success without difficulty or any form of oppression. The problems Sam encountered were not caused by Safia but by the people in the society he associates with such as Dr. Maclean. The alleged relationship that was claimed he had with the nurse was just a set up by his friend major Gaga and the people around him could not give him any opportunity to explain himself, thereby contributing to his failure and inability to realize his dream of becoming a medical doctor. This indicates the damaging negative effects of social injustice which can equally happen to a woman if she is denied education and the opportunity to make choices for herself. All these explains why Alkali depicts Safia in the *Invisible Borders* as a successful character:

Safia...had gone back to Sahel State and taken up her internship at the Sahel General Hospital. After a year, she signed up for her NYSC in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State... Safia was able to handle quite a large number of emergency cases. (p. 113)

This indicates that Safia is dedicated and hardworking because she is offered a job in the state as a result of her immense contribution. Alkali's depiction of Sam and Safia indicates the impact of education on a woman. But most importantly, Alkali's character portrayal draws positive attention to the benefits of giving the woman the opportunity to show her capabilities and the consequences of denying both men and women their rights.

Another new trend evident in Alkali's new fiction is her portrayal of well dignified male characters that are equally successful. She juxtaposes the roles of the male characters in order to depict the real picture of life in the modern society and show its effects on them. For instance, Halima in *Invisible Borders* introduces her brother:

My famous brother, the AVM, who has been called an Air Vice Marshal since he was a kid because there was no profession that obsessed his young mind than that of an Air Force Officer, so I was told... I present to you Dr Sufyan, a cardiologist at a hospital in Kaduna. (p. 60)

Sam on the other hand could not achieve his dream as a result of the tragic experiences he had. He dreams of becoming a medical doctor but ends up pursuing a course in journalism and at the end becomes a politician. This is evident in the text as described:

Sam Tilla meanwhile escaped the village and for a year floated like a flotsam on waves. He moved in bad company, got into bad habits, alcohol, weed, drugs and women. Dissatisfied with any course but medical school, he reluctantly pursued a course in journalism, after four years of tortuous studies, in which he was suspended a couple of times, he finally graduated. (p. 47)

What is clear for now is that Alkali is unique in her characterization. The men in women writings are now given room and roles that they deserve as opposed to the earlier portrayal as useless men by early women writers. Alkali has succeeded in bridging the gap between men and women in terms of characterization which in a way helps in depicting a realistic view of the society.

The issue of complementarity of the roles of both male and female clearly exemplifies that female creative writers no longer strictly deal with feminist issues. The borders in terms of achievement are becoming thinner. Such borders have always been portrayed in marriages. However, in some recent female creative writings, marriage no longer serves as a tool for destruction. Instead, it is now considered to be the final fulfillment or achievement of a woman. Hardship and failures are no longer visible in women's writings. The old borders of early marriage, oppression and abuse in marriages are no longer the concern. Nigerian female writers especially Alkali have turned in another direction in order to dissolve these borders and indicate that women can become successful very easily without any difficulty. In her recent novel, Alkali depicts the issue of change from a wider perspective not just strictly from the female perspective. Alkali has succeeded in creating a world without borders by depicting the peaceful coexistence between the citizens of the Nigerian nation despite the religious and cultural diversity. Alkali's portrayal and description of Dr. Sufyan vividly indicates the writer's effort in depicting unity among the people. This is evident in the text:

She had an agreement with her suitor to inform and to discuss with her people before he paid them a visit especially as he was a partial stranger to that part of the country having come from the southern region of Nigeria. (p. 57).

Again, the issue of politics is another dominant concern clearly portrayed in *Invisible Borders* because Alkali describes the nature of politicians and the ways they bribe people, gain control and win election:

Sam and Gaga had some measure of control over all the village heads in the districts. Not only that, they were married to the daughters of the most influential men in Savannah State. In their bid to win the elections, they had lined the pockets of the traditional and religious leaders.... (p.99).

This situation is typical especially during election campaigns as youths are also given weapons like guns. Alkali portrays the effect of using thugs in politics as she vividly describes the end of Sam and Gaga: "Both Sam and Gaga have paid dearly. Some say unknown gunmen out there ambushed and settled some unknown scores, others, rumored that their own gunmen, the Mbalbala gunned them down by mistake" (p102). The tragic death of Sam and Gaga in the hands of their political rivals clearly indicates the consequences of their actions.

Other themes like the issue of betrayal and deceit is reflected through the character of Gaga and Sam. Gaga is the character who deceives Sam and deprives him of marrying Safia. No one listens to Sam despite his attempts to explain the situation which leads to his destruction. Sam couldn't see the borders while Gaga continue messing up his life. Safia on her part could not listen to Sam because of his bad records and negative ways of life. At the end of the day, Didi captures the gloom and hopelessness of a wasted generation very succinctly when she said "you children of nowadays fear nothing, respect nothing and honor nothing. You possess hearts without borders" (p. 94).

In essence, Alkali highlights various issues concerning women and power relations. The writer in her *Invisible Borders* indicates that there are differences but the borders are becoming thinner. The events in the story clearly depict the thinness of those borders thereby rendering them invisible. *Invisible Borders* clearly indicate the shift in women's writings, with different dimensions and views as opposed to the earlier women's writings.

Conclusion

This type of transformation or shift in thematic concern is in line with what Butler emphasises on the importance of double movement which allows feminists (female writers) to have both political identification and recognition, multiplicity of identical sites rather than advocating for a single identity (1993, p. 29). Postmodern feminism has "provided space that legitimizes the search for the voices of the displaced, marginalized and oppressed black people" (Hooks, 1984, p. 24). This is also in line with Alkali's depiction of strong male and female characters such as Avi Dayyan, Salvia, Samba and Musa Ture in *The Initiates* and Safia, Sam and Dr. Sufyan in *Invisible Borders*. Alkali's focus on change offered the opportunity for women who had felt excluded in male writings and men who were not recognised in female writings to be accommodated. The two selected texts reflect a woman's writing with different dimensions and views as opposed to other women writings that deal with the usual theme of emancipation, disillusionment, oppression or lamentation about the condition of women. Indeed, with these two novels, Alkali has

introduced something novel in Nigerian female writing and she has also left a legacy that is incalculable and enduring.

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